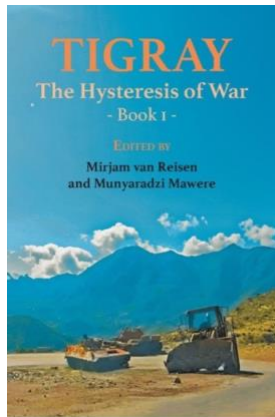


‘Followers of the Devil’s Code 666’: The Writing on the Wall of an Intent to Eradicate a People

Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Araya Abrha Medhanyie

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Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Araya Abrha Medhanyie

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Love is stronger than death, jealousy is more unrelenting than Sheol.

Abstract

This study looks at the semiotic landscape to interpret the 2020–2022 Tigray war. The body of semiotic observations consists of 78 texts including (i) graffiti left in public places by the military who invaded Tigray; and (ii) signs visible on public roads and public places. The graffiti analysed in this study was found in the Emperor Yohannes Public School in Mekelle and at the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital. The signs on public roads include a banner ‘Game over, Woyane’ carried by retreating forces from Eritrea after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed as well as signboards in public places in Mekelle. Following the building blocks for discourse analysis proposed by Gee (1999), the authors conclude that the semiotic landscape offers important insights into strong sentiments of hostility that the soldiers who invaded Tigray had towards the people of Tigray, messages such as, for instance, ‘Followers of 666’ (the Devil), which stigmatise Tigrayans and justify the call for their eradication. The graffiti messages analysed aim to (i) distinguish Tigrayans from other Ethiopians (‘othering’); (ii) mobilise Ethiopians for the eradication of Tigrayans; and (iii) create an undercurrent of fear of the (dark) ‘power’ of Tigrayans. These messages include expressions of intent to ‘eradicate’ the Tigray population. Signs such as ‘Pretoria Night Club’, referring to the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, reflect the lack of faith that the people of Tigray have in the Agreement, which has left them in an uncertain situation.

Key words: Tigray war, woyane, eradication, genocide, Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Introduction

The process of establishing power over others is accompanied by discourse on the situation in which those seeking or holding power, and those subordinated to the power, participate and express themselves somehow. Scott (1990) has elaborated on this process in what he calls ‘transcripts’:

The argument that offstage or veiled forms of aggression offer a harmless catharsis that helps preserve the status quo assumes that we are examining a rather abstract debate in which one side is handicapped rather than a concrete, material struggle. But relations between masters and slaves, between Brahmins and untouchables are not simply a clash of ideas about dignity and the right to rule; they are a process of subordination firmly anchored in material practices. (Scott, 1990, p. 187)

These material practices are observable and often leave material traces. Scott (1990) indicates that the use symbols, verbal formulas, and expressions or acts of humility are used to mobilise the in-group against the out-group. Power, in this social situation, means “the chance of a man or number of men to realise their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the act” (Weber, 1946, p. 180).

According to Scott, there are public transcripts and hidden transcripts. The public transcript operates when power actors aim to install hegemony through officially communicated messages, hiding disagreement and anti-hegemonic thoughts, while the hidden transcript represents the underlying factors that are secretly kept by the group (Scott, 1990). These underlying factors may be revealed through various means in the semiotic landscape. This is the visual linguistic environment, including various semiotic resources, such as texts, symbols, drawings, or pictures (Pesch, 2021). Understanding the role of language in discourse can help us examine public and hidden transcripts.

Discourse is a means by which humans integrate language with various non-linguistic elements, including different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects appropriately in specific contexts. This integration serves to enact and recognise various identities and activities, assign

meanings to the material world, distribute social goods in particular ways, create certain types of meaningful connections in our experiences, and prioritize certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (Gee, 1999). The Discourse with a capital ‘D’ refers to the collective sense that emerges from a daily common discourse. The discovery of Discourse requires the examination of ordinary discourse. Discourse is thus intrinsically linked to the context in which socio-political and economic power is played out. Discourse cannot be understood without understanding the context in which it is placed. Investigating discourse means linking the text back to the context. This is an exegetic exercise, a careful consideration of the meaning of the text in its context.

Graffiti is one relevant resource for studying text in public places (Bloch, 2012). Graffiti and other texts in the semiotic landscape are widely available as signifiers of discourses in the Tigray war. The war started on 3 November 2020 and ended when a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022. During the war, the soldiers that entered Tigray as part of the coalition of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) left graffiti in schools, health facilities, roadsides, and other public places where they camped and some of these have been described (Awet, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Claes, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a).

Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) found that the term ‘Woyane’ refers not only to the political party of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), but it is likely also to all ethnic Tigrayans. Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b) conclude that graffiti expresses an intent of genocide by using explicit expressions suggesting that the ‘eradication’ of Tigrayans is needed and creating a strong sense of the ‘otherness’ of Tigrayans as non-humans. These disconcerting conclusions warrant further investigation.

The use of graffiti to spread hate speech was not only employed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), but also by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). Following the outbreak of the war on 3 November 2020, it was reported on 22 November 2020 that fighting took place in the Tigray region on three fronts, Adwa, Gerhu

Sirnay, and in the South (Raya), with heavy losses (EEPA, 2020). The same report states that possibly up to 20 battalions of the EDF were taking part in the fighting on all three fronts. The presence of Eritrean forces was denied by both the Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership (EEPA, 2020). Due to the siege, no pictures were available in international media until a few media representatives were allowed to enter Tigray in the last week of February 2021. The presence of the Eritrean forces was only acknowledged by Prime Minister Abiy in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament in March 2021. It is, therefore, relevant to investigate the presence of the Eritrean military in the semiotic landscape and interpret the meaning of what was left behind. The semiotic landscape also involves text by civilians, with implicit messages on the situation.

The objective of this study is to analyse additional graffiti within the context and discourse during the Tigray war, to reveal underlying reasoning. To investigate this, the research question was: *What are the implicit and explicit meanings of the texts available in public places during and after the Tigray war?*

Theoretical framework: The hidden transcripts in discourse

Discourse analysis considers how language, both spoken and written, enacts social and cultural perspectives and identities (Gee, 1999). The role of language is not only encoding and decoding messages, but also making the message understood in each context. Gee explains the relevance of studying language in a social situation where power is contested:

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. (Gee, 1999, p. 11)

The language disseminated in the exchange of a message is subject to, and a reflection of, the established context.

We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language, but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol

systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process. (Gee, 1999, p. 11)

According to Gee (1999), discourse analysis reveals discourse to be significant in each given context, in which a sign system and ways of knowing are established to define a certain group as being different from another (p. 121-122). Gee further introduces seven building blocks for discourse analysis, which were earlier introduced in this study by Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a). Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) examine the graffiti left from the 2020–2022 Tigray war in the Martyrs Commemoration Museum. The following building blocks were identified:

- **Significance:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?
- **Practices (activities):** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?
- **Identities:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?
- **Relationships:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?
- **Politics:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as ‘good’ or ‘acceptable’ or not?
- **Connections:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversation

used to connect things and people or show these as relevant to each other or not – instead, being irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?

- **Sign systems and ways of knowing:** How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations being used to privilege or disadvantage different sign systems (language, social languages, and other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing? (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Gee, 1999).

Graffiti is a communication tool that explains the political, socio-economic, and cultural context of communities from the perspective of graffiti writers. According to Bloch graffiti is “systematically produced, stylized markings of monikers, images, and symbols written on infrastructure by self-acknowledged members of the graffiti community” (Bloch, 2012, p. 51). The material expressions, visible in public spaces, can provide an insight into the mind-set of the authors who left them behind. Some, but not all, may be signs of deliberate communication. Mocking is a clear strategy that hides other meanings of the text (Claes, 2024).

Wartime graffiti are a real-time documentation of the development of the momentum, as well as indicators of the underlying and immediate causes of the war. Walker (2019) discusses that graffiti serves several purposes ranging from enthusiasm for the war to subversion and the registering of survival. It serves as a medium signifying the survival of the individual and offering a place to comment on authority (Walker, 2019).

The trend of analysing the explicit and implicit interpretations of wartime graffiti writings was among the common discourses based on the graffiti from world wars. Both the First (1914–1918) and Second (1939–1945) World Wars were characterised by the extensive use of graffiti written by soldiers (Shaikh, 2022; Usic, 2019).

Methodology

Approach

Following the study of Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a) on graffiti left in the Martyr's Commemoration Museum in Mekelle during the 2020–2022 war, the researchers expanded their view on the semiotic landscape to widen the scope for further interpretation and triangulation of the findings of the first study. While the first study was carried out on many texts found in the museum, it was considered that these were left in one particular space, and concerning one specific 'author', the ENDF military, which used the museum as a military camp.

Therefore, the study lacked a broader scope of material that would allow interpretation of expressions left by actors other than the ENDF and the Tigray population. This research, thus, attempts to study an additional broader set of artefacts, which complement the earlier study. Considering the available artefacts, the following were selected for further study:

- Graffiti left in public places by the military who invaded Tigray: The graffiti analysed in this study was found in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School in Mekelle and on the wall of the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital. The graffiti in these places does not contain overtly public messages, but speaks to the mind-set of those who left the texts behind.
- Signs visible on public roads and in public places with an intention for them to be seen: A sign selected on public roads concerns a picture of a banner 'Game over, Woyane', which was circulated on social media (Twitter). The banner was photographed on a truck that was transporting retreating forces from Eritrea after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, and it was intended to be seen. Other selected signboards were in public places in Mekelle equally referring to the Agreement and intended to be seen, but in these cases were placed by civilians of Mekelle.

The selection of the texts is based on the following criteria:

- The artefacts were intact, could be observed, and had a clear origin;
- The context of their expression could be investigated and interpreted.
- The artefacts provided additionality over earlier investigated material.

The criteria used for the selection of the texts are related to: volume, place, languages, nature of artefact, authors, and period during which the text was left. The intention was to ensure diverse sources. The relevance of the texts was also weighed.

Table 10.1. Selection criteria artefacts for discourse analysis

Criteria	Martyrs Commemoration Museum	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School	Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital	Banner on vehicle	Signboards in public places
Volume	Large volume (n = 142)	Large volume (n= 78)	One text	One text	Several texts (fewer than 5)
Place	Mekelle	Mekelle	Gerhu Sirnay	Shire	Mekelle
Authors	Ethiopian National Defence Force	Ethiopian National Defence Force	Eritrean soldiers	Eritrean soldiers	Tigray civilians
Languages	Multiple: Amharic, Arabic, Oromiffa, Tigrinya, English	Amharic and English	Tigrinya	Tigrinya and English	Tigrinya and English

Criteria	Martyrs Commemoration Museum	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School	Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital	Banner on vehicle	Signboards in public places
Nature of artefact	Graffiti, drawings, and text left on walls and other objects	Graffiti, drawings, and text left on whiteboard, blackboard, walls and other objects	Graffiti text left on the wall	Banners and photos on social media	Signboards with names in public places
Period	End of 2020 till mid-April 2021	End of 2020 till mid-April 2021	During the war	After the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement	After the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

The graffiti found in the Martyr’s Commemoration Museum is analysed separately in a chapter by Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a). Combining the analysis in this chapter and the analysis of the corpus found in the museum, a comparison was made which is published in Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b).

Guided by Gee’s ‘building blocks’ for discourse analysis, the study examined graffiti found in public spaces during the 2020–2022 Tigray war. The research employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis. The quantitative analysis aimed to provide evidenced generalisations of the nature of the graffiti while the qualitative approach will bring interpretation of the meaning to the context. Two phone interviews were carried out after the initial analysis to clarify elements of the context. Both were with persons related to the Emperor Yohannes School. The aim was to obtain additional information about which part of the ENDF army had camped in the school, information concerning the graffiti, and their general impressions. These interviews were carried out in May 2024.

Table 10.2. Method of data collection and analysis

No.	Criteria	Approach
1	Method	Quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis
2	Study subject	Graffiti and text associated with the war
3	Data collection tool	Capturing photos and observation
4	Sites of data collection	Public spaces: (i) School (ii) Health facility (iii) Roads
5	Specific sites	Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (27-28 December 2020, 15-17 April 2021) Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital (9 July 2023) Public roads in Shire (Jan 20, 2023) and Mekelle (9 September 2024)
6	Number of collected data	Emperor Yohannes School: 83 Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital: 2

No.	Criteria	Approach
		Banner on truck: 1
		Public space signboard: 1
		Total graffiti content collected: 87
7	Exclusion criteria	Duplication and blurredness of image
8	Number of excluded data	9 (5 blurred graffiti that the researcher is unable to read and 4 duplications)
9	Number of graffiti content used	78
9	Coding and procedures following	The images of the graffiti expressions were first converted to picture format, listed in a spreadsheet, and then transcribed into the original language and translated into English. The translations were conducted by the first author and checked with a panel of judges (total translators to agree: n=3).
10	In-depth interview	IDI01, 13 May 2024 IDI02, 15 May 2024
10	Analysis procedures	Discourse analysis was employed by considering the content based on the 'building blocks' adapted from Gee, 1999)

The pictures captured in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School were taken by a member of the school community. These were collected and crosschecked on location, as well as the class setting, with what is in the photo and videos. After the verification processes, the messages were transcribed, translated, and analysed according to the research criteria indicated in the theoretical framework. The pictures taken in the school were compared with photographs collected by the Tigray Education Bureau at the Emperor Yohannes School. The Tigray Education

Bureau provided consent for the use of the photos taken in the school.

The pictures in Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital were photographed by one of the authors during a research field trip in 2023. The footage of the road transport in Tigray was obtained from X (formerly Twitter) and was verified with other available sources using the picture published on various social media in 2023. The pictures in Mekelle after the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement were taken by one of the authors in 2024.

After the outbreak of the war, the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (named after Emperor Yohannes IV) located in Mekelle was used as barracks by soldiers. It was occupied from the end of 2020 till mid-April 2021. A lot of graffiti and text were left in the school. Out of the 40 texts photographed and analysed for this study, 39 were written in Amharic. The graffiti was found on walls, boards, doors, chairs and on a lesson plan. All of the graffiti includes derogatory content toward the people of Tigray.

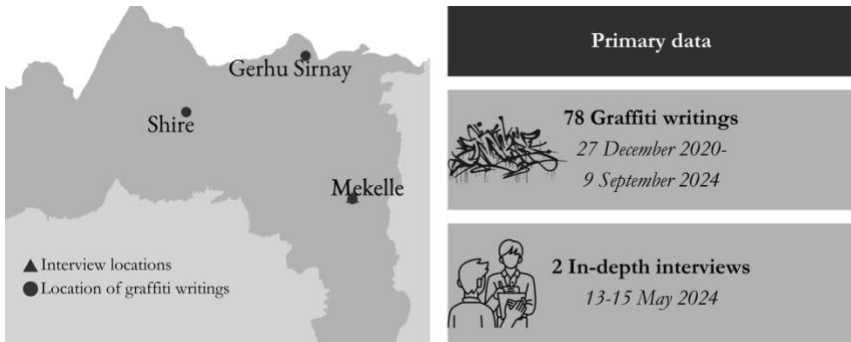


Figure 10.1. Overview of data collected and used in the study

Study sites

Four study sites were included in this study: the Emperor Yohannes School, the Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital, a banner on track, and signboards in public places.

The Emperor Yohannes School, located in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, was occupied by Ethiopian soldiers for eight months from the

end of 2020 until mid-April 2021. A lot of graffiti and text were left on the school walls, boards, doors, chairs, and on a lesson plan.

Gerhu Sirnay is the centre for the Egela District in the Central Zone of Tigray bordering Eritrea. The Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital is the only hospital in Egela and serves a population of over 50,000 people living in the district. Its services were stopped after it was looted and destroyed by EDF following the breakout of the Tigray war. EDF soldiers also camped in the hospital during the war. The graffiti written in that hospital by the EDF soldiers is also included in this research.

The banner on a truck transporting Eritrean soldiers back to Eritrea after the war, while they were pulling out from the central part of Tigray as a result of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities, is also included. The vehicle was photographed on a road near the town of Shire in Western Tigray. The photograph was circulated on social media. The banner was written in Tigrinya and English.

Signboards in public places in Mekelle were photographed after the war and refer to the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. The text on these signboards is written in a combination of Tigrinya and English.

Results and findings

Figure 10.2 presents the analysis of the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School, based on the discourse analysis building blocks following Gee (1999). The numbers show a positive score on each item. The total on each item is 83 (the total number of graffiti analysed in the school).

The analysis concludes that the graffiti attributed significance 66 times, while practice is designated 55 times out of the total of 83 graffiti. The soldiers identified themselves as protectors of national sovereignty, as well as of peace and security, in comparison to portraying Tigrayans as stateless traitors. Identity accounted for 69 times, while relationship was referred to 46 times out of the total of 83 graffiti texts.

Through the graffiti, the soldiers reflected their perception of there being strong relationship bonds among Ethiopians, except for

Tigrayans. Tigrayans were portrayed as being different and not seen as being Ethiopian. This contributed to an understanding of other texts mobilising opposition against Tigrayans. An example is the graffiti stating that ‘Woyane’ learnt betrayal against their own country, from their forefather Emperor Yohannes. The graffiti is a direct reference to the name of the school.

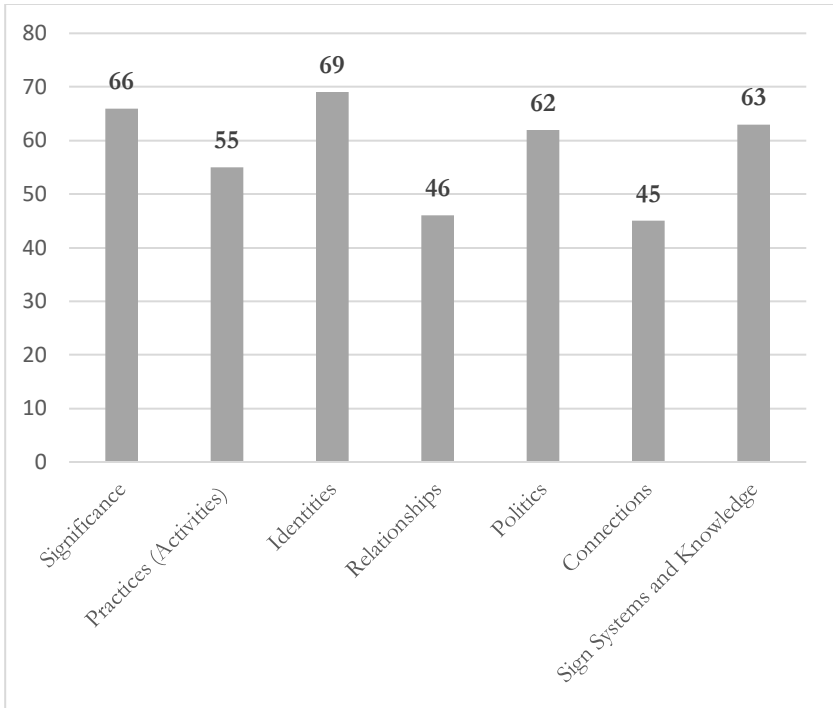


Figure 10.2. Frequency per item positively scored off the graffiti writings in Emperor Yohannes School (n=83)

The graffiti also suggests that Tigrayans are sub-human. They are portrayed as being a threat to Ethiopians. They are described as ‘cannibals’, ‘daytime hyenas’, ‘junta’, ‘traitors’, and ‘looters’. Graffiti with such references was found everywhere in the Emperor Yohannes School: on the walls, school boards, and even on a chair.

Significance

One of the elements of Gee’s discourse analysis building blocks uses significance to explain how a speaker or writer makes certain things important (put in the foreground) and less important (placed in the

background) (1999). To emphasise the importance of the historical grounding of the messages, some of the graffiti historical references are used as a technique to mobilise objectivity in seeking support for the claims that Tigrayans had historically betrayed Ethiopia. The graffiti below reads:

አጼ ዮሃንስ ጁንታ ነበር ወያኔ የሱ ታናሽ ነው።

Emperor Yohannes was junta. Woyane is its junior.

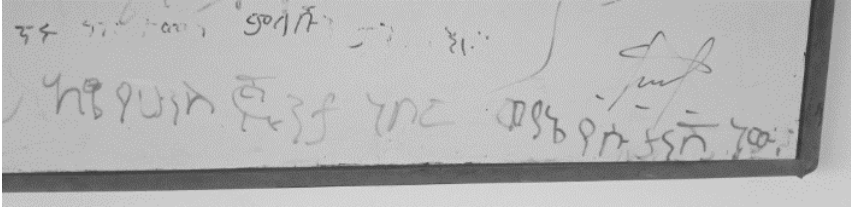


Figure 10.3. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Emperor Yohannes was a junta. Woyane is its junior
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 10.3 represents the Tigrayans as a junta.

Another instance of graffiti reads:

ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት አስካሁን ለኪዳት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነዉ ለምን?

ትግራይ ማለት

ት=ትሒን ማለት ነዉ

ግ=ግንድ አንሳ

ራ= ራይጥ አይጠመጎጥ

ይ= ይቅዘን ቅዘናም ፈሳም ማለት ነዉ

ወያኔ ህወሀት ብቻ ሳይሆን ትግሬ የሚባል ብሔር ከኢትዮጵያና ከምድረገጽ መጥፋት አለበት ከሃዲ ሀገር የለውም

The only ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?

Tigray means

T=Bedbug

G=Stem stealer

R=Rats and rodents

Y=Full of grief and cowardly

Not only Woyane TPLF, but the ethnic group named Tigrayan must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth. Traitors don't have a country.

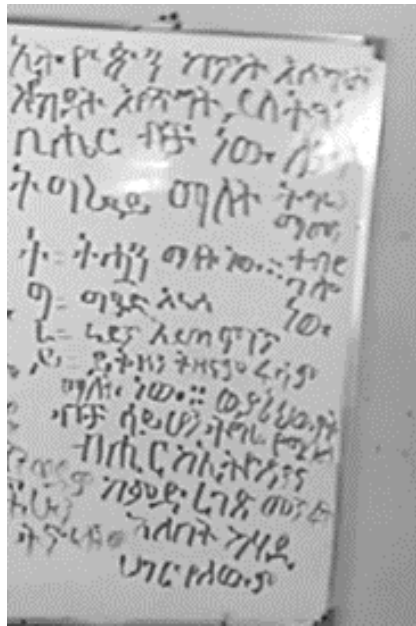


Figure 10.4. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 10.4 clarifies that the references made to ‘Woyane’ are inclusive of all ethnic Tigrayans and that this inclusivity is deliberate. The soldiers started with a premise that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians, but rather a threat to Ethiopia. Then the graffiti advanced to a genocidal call, stating: “Tigrayans must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth.”

The excerpt in Figure 10.5 is consistent with that in Figure 10.4, in that the soldiers reiterated that Tigrayans are non-Ethiopian. It reads:

What is the SI unit of Junta [?] Its SI unit is Woyane. They are countryless, they are placeless.

The content of these graffiti refers to Tigrayans as a non-Ethiopian out-group of enemies that must be eradicated to maintain peace and stability among the in-group Ethiopians.

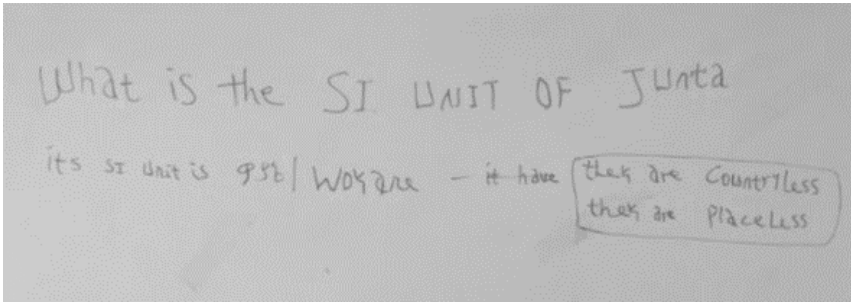


Figure 10.5. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: they are countryless

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

Another dimension of demonising ethnic Tigrayans is by associating culturally sensitive words with Tigrayans. The graffiti excerpt in Figure 10.6 states that Tigrayans are followers of the Devil’s code 666, which is culturally determined as immoral among Ethiopians. It reads:

ለማንኛውም እሄ ትምህርት ቤት ነው። የS*x ትምህርት ማስተማር የሽፍትና የአዳር ቤት ነው። ምድረ 666 ወያኔ ትምህርት ቤት ከፈትኩ ብሎ S*x ቤት ከፈተ ይገርማል። የወያኔ መጨረሻ እሄ ነው ምድረ S*x ቆሻሻ ሁላ ዜጋ ከማስተማር ይልቅ ኮንዶም ትሰበስባለህ አንተን ብሎ መምህር S*x ኮንዶም ፊት አያትህ አንተም ትጠቀማለህ ወያኔ።

Anyways is this a school? This is rather a sex education school where people spend the night. This is the land of 666, [this is a symbol that stands for the condemned Satanism in the Ethiopian context], amazing Woyane opened a sexual education institution; assuming it’s a school. This is Woyane’s dead end. These pieces of garbage you collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth you can be considered as a teacher? You and your grandfather are used to condoms, Woyane.

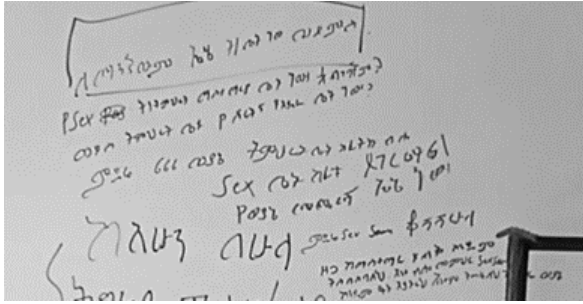


Figure 10.6. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Land of 666
 (Captured on 28 December 2020)

The number 666, often referred to as ‘the number of the beast’, has its origins in the Bible. Specifically, the New Testament 13:18 says “this calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666”. This verse is part of a broader passage that describes two beasts. The first beast emerges from the sea, and the second beast comes from the Earth, enforcing the worship of the first beast and its image. In eschatology (the study of end times), 666 is often seen as a sign of the coming Antichrist, who will appear in the last days before Christ’s return. The number serves as a mark of those who align themselves with this figure of ultimate evil.

The graffiti writings follow three mechanisms: (i) to dissociate Tigrayans from other Ethiopians (ii) to mobilise Ethiopians for the eradication of Tigrayans and (iii) to mobilise an undercurrent of fear against the power of Tigrayans. The first mechanism uses the historical context to claim that Tigrayans were and still are betrayers of Ethiopian nationalism. The second mechanism associates culturally sensitive topics with the habits of Tigrayans. In a religious country, culture and religion are among the most influential methods is to frame Tigrayans as followers of 666. This is an automatic call for these communities to join the war against Tigray to protect their religious and cultural values. The third mechanism is heightening the significance of the problem not as a political or social problem, but rooted in deep religious and spiritual values. The soldiers indicate in the graffiti that eradicating Tigrayans is the only solution to protect Ethiopia from ‘stateless traitors’ who have evil spiritual powers.

Practices

Activities are conventional ways that people with certain identities have developed to function, what they are interested in, or to explain how they portray the actions of their enemies (Gee, 1999). The graffiti frequently linked the school education to the name-giver of the school, Emperor Yohannes. This graffiti in Figure 10.7) states:

ደደብ ጌታቸው አረዳ፣ ደደብ አቦይ ጸሃዖ የባንዳው የአጼ ዮሐንስ ዘር የሆኑት የልጅ ልጆች ሚናቸውን ተጫውተዋል በነበሩበት ወይም በቆዩበት ስራ ውጤታማ ጁንታ መሆን አገራቸውን በመካድና ሰለዘህ እነዚህ ያልተማሩ የሚመስሉ ነገር ግን ሽልማት በአለም አቀፍ አሸባሪነት ተሸልመዋል።

The ignorant Getachew Reda, and ignorant Abay Tsehaye, the grand sons of the bandit Emperor Yohannes did their role. They performed very well being a Junta, betraying one's own country. These ignorant are provided with international awards in terrorism.

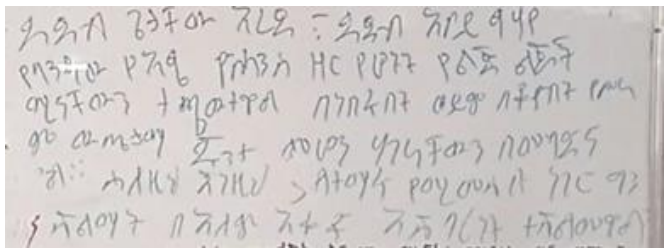


Figure 10.7. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The Ignorant Leadership

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

These claims attempt to links the Tigray leadership directly with Emperor Yohannes (a descendant), after whom the school is named. The graffiti emphasises the school environment of the graffiti by juxtaposing it against the qualification of ‘ignorance’ attached to the TPLF leaders.

The graffiti in Figure 10.8 reads:

ወያኔ ማለት ሀገር መከዳት የተማረው ከጥንት አያቶቹ ከነ አጼ ዮሐንስ ነገሠ አጼ ዮሐንስ ለጦር መሳርያና ለሰልጣን ብሎ አጼ ቴዎድሮስን አእምሮአዊ ሀገር የሸጠ ሰላይ ተላላኪ ሌባ ነበር ወያኔ ጁንታው ቡድን ደግሞ በተጨማሪም በሽታ በዘር ስለሆነ ከአጼ ዮሐንስ የተማረውን መከዳት የባንዳነት ትምህርት በተግባር።

Woyane learnt betrayal of one's own country for its ancient ancestors like Emperor Yohannes. Emperor Yohannes was a spy messenger who handed over Emperor Tewodros to England in exchange for weapons. Given that disease transmits hereditarily, Woyane Junta practised what was learnt from Emperor Yohannes.

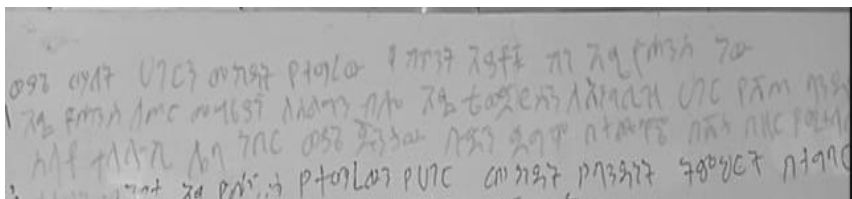


Figure 10.8. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Learnt from Emperor Yohannes

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Some of the graffiti images also accuse the Emperor Yohannes School environment of ‘teaching’ the students about the TPLF. These contain political messages. The general sentiments expressed are frustration and blaming the TPLF for a bad situation in Ethiopia and accusing the TPLF of benefitting Tigray over the rest of Ethiopia.

The sharp mockery in the graffiti in Figure 10.9 also relates directly to the place where the graffiti was found, a school:

እሺ ተማሪዎች ስርቆት ምን እንደሆነ አወቃችሁ በጣም ጥሩ ወያኔ ኢትዮጵያን እንዴት እንደዘረፉት ያስተምህራችኋል። መልካም ትምህርት ህወሀት ለስርቆት መነሻ ወያኔ ለዘረፋ መነሻ መልካም የዘረፋ ግዜ ይሁንልክ ደደቡ ህወሀት ወያኔ ጁንታዉ ፈሳም ነዉ።

Ok students, great that you know what theft is. It teaches you how Woyane looted Ethiopia. Have a nice class. TPLF took irreversible commitment to rob; TPLF took irreversible commitment to loot. Have a nice looting season. The ignorant TPLF junta farts.

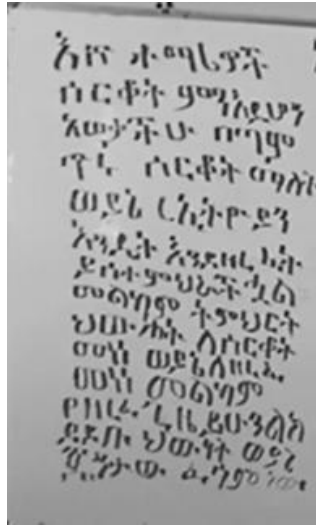


Figure 10.9. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Have a nice class

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti writings portrayed the TPLF as a ‘thief’ who ‘looted’ Ethiopia and suggested with sharp irony that students should take lessons from this.

The graffiti in Figure 10.10 reads:

ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት አስከሁን ለከደት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነዉ ለምን

The only ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?

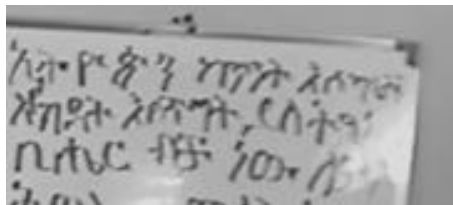


Figure 10.10. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Betrayal

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti says that the soldiers framed Tigrayans as an ethnic group that exposed Ethiopia to danger.

The graffiti in Figure 10.11 is also explicit:

ቁጩ ከአሁን በኋላ ትግራይ ፖሊስ (ልዩ ሀይል) ብሎ ነገር የለም አባታችሁ ህዳር 21 03 2013::

Finished, from now onwards there is no more Tigray police (Tigray Special Forces). It is dead. November 21 03 2013 [Ethiopian Calendar].

The date converts to Monday, 30 November 2020 in the Gregorian calendar.

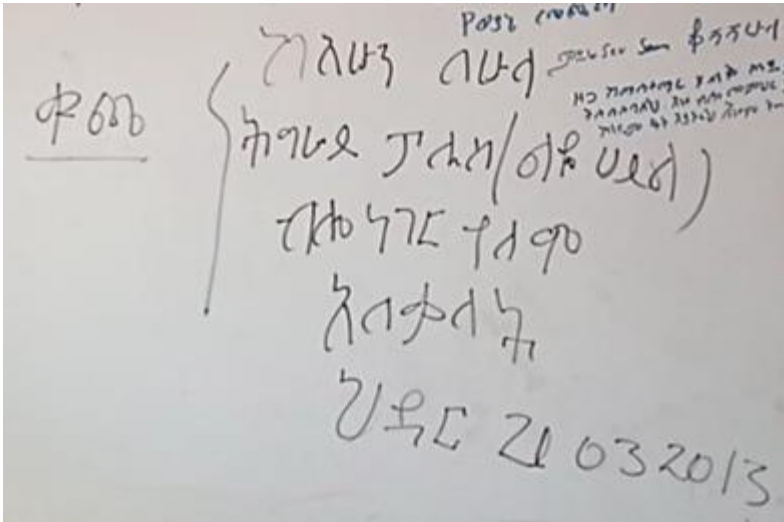


Figure 10.11. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigray Special Forces is dead

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

The soldiers stated, in the graffiti, that they had destroyed the Tigray Defence Forces, which is consistent with the claim of Ethiopian Government on the same day:

Tigray’s leaders ‘on the run’ says Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy. Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said on Monday [30 November 2020] that leaders from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) had fled from Tigray’s regional capital Mekelle, after federal government troops claimed to have captured the city. (RFI, 2020)

Hence, the content of the graffiti “Special Forces is Dead” timed on 30 November 2020, is remarkably consistent with the announcement

by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in the Parliament that the Tigray leadership had fled. This shows that the graffiti was not random, but that these were well contextualised in the situation and that they were aware of this situation.

Making the conversation one about ethnic dominance, the graffiti in Figure 10.12 reads:

ካሁን በኋላ ትግሬ መሪ አይሆንም ለትግሬ አማራ መዳሀኒቱ ነጩ አንድ አማራ ለ50 ትግሬ መዳሀኒቱ ነጩ ካለውቃችሁ ወያኔን ጠይቋት

Forever from now onwards Tigrayan would never be a leader again. It is Ambara who knows how to handle Tigrayans. One Ambaran will suffice to deal with 50 Tigrayans. You can ask Woyane's testimony if you are not aware of it.

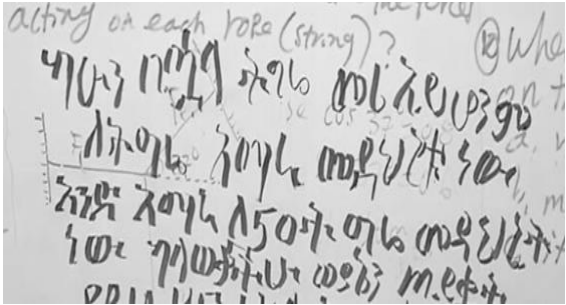


Figure 10.12. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayans will never be a leader again
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti claimed that ethnic Tigrayans must not be nominated as leaders, taking lessons from their past. The ratio of 1:50 fighting capability serves to belittle the self-defence capability of ethnic Tigrayans as compared to other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

The graffiti in Figure 10.13 found in the Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ወያኔ ሞተ
Woyane is dead



Figure 10.13. Graffiti on the wall of the looted Emperor Yohannes School: Woyane is dead
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

The graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School in Figure 10.13 reads: “Woyane is dead” – starkly placed among the destruction of the facility.

Making an explicit reference to the slogan introduced by President Isayas of Eritrea in January 2018, ‘Game over, Woyane’, this slogan reads:

ገ/ጸኔ ገ/ሀጻን አከትሞልሀል

The game is over G/Tsion G/Kid

The content directly referenced, mocked and belittled the President of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael. Both Debretsion and Gebretsion are common names in Tigray. Debretsion means the crown of Tsion (Zion) while Gebretsion is the servant of Tsion (Zion). The authors may have confused his name. Sometimes a distinction is made and only the TPLF leadership is addressed. In

other messages it seems that the entire ethnic group of Tigrayans is addressed. This can be seen in the graffiti in Figure 10.14:

የወያኔ ህልም ታሪክ ማበላሸት እና ሀገር ማፍረስ የባንዳነት ሚና መጫወት ወያኔ ጁንታ ቡድን በጣም ባለፈው 2011 ዓመተ ምህረት በወጣው ሃገር ከዳተኝነት ትግራይን ወክለው 0 በሚባል የማህይዎዎቻችን ደረጃ ከሞትኩ ሰርዶ አይብቀል የሚል የዘመናችን ድንጋይ አህያ ነው ተ*ዳ ወያኔ:

*The dreams of Woyane is destroying history, destruction of country and acting the role of bandits. In the last 2011 (Ethiopian Calendar), Woyane Junta group representing Tigray won 0 award of the ignorants for being traitors. They practiced there is no need for the grass to grow after my passing away [Amharic proverb]. They are stones, donkeys, fu** Woyane.*

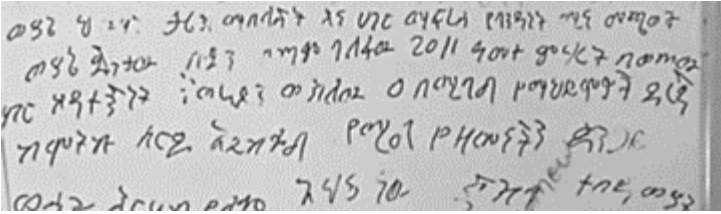


Figure 10.14. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The dreams of Woyane is destroying history
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

Another graffiti (Figure 10.15) reads “Woyane. Game Over”. In this overt political messages the TPLF leaders are mentioned and the ‘Woyane’ are referred as a “junta group”.

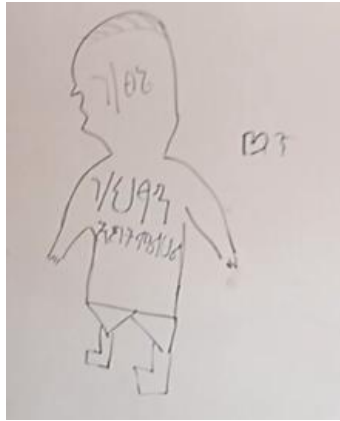


Figure 10.15. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Game Over Woyane

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

The same text “Game over, Woyane” was posted on a banner placed on a truck, carrying Eritrean soldiers from Western Tigray back to Eritrea almost three months after the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (Figure 10.16).



Figure 10.16. Banner on a truck, carrying Eritrean soldiers

(@alex_temelso, on Twitter [X], Jan 20, 2023)

The photograph of the truck with the banner in shown Figure 10.16 was posted on social media, by what would seem to be a supporter of

the Eritrean campaign in Tigray (@alex_temelso, Jan 20, 2023, on Twitter (X) with the title: “This is EDF (Aradom) leaving Tigray after the defeat of TPLF with our motto Game Over”. EDF refers to the Eritrean Defence Forces, which participated in the 2020–2022 Tigray war as allies of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. It is of interest to note that the banner on the truck is written both in English and in Tigrinya. The use of the English language indicates that the audience of the content written on the banner is, among others, an international audience. Under the English message, the same message is painted in Tigrinya.

The term ‘Aradom’ seems to be a stark reminder of Tigray fighters being trapped by their opponents. Aradom is a Tigrinya word that refers to glorifying someone whose heroism puts the enemy in terror. The story of Aradom refers to a mountain in Tigray that is famous for the Battle of Enderta. The invading Italian army tried to capture this place. In April 1939 fighters opposing the Italian invasion hid in a cave in the mountain and were attacked by poison gas and bombs and the story is that no one escaped. The reference on the banner is a stark reminder of the underlying narrative, that Tigrayans are trapped and there is no exit for them to escape. The Tigrinya ከፍብኪ ኢና translates to “That’s how we are”, but it may have a meaning underneath: “We are proud of what we have done and we have shown our capacity”.



Figure 10.17. Eritreans in the diaspora singing about the war in Tigray (@HeranTigray. Twitter [X], Jan 20, 2023)

The Tweet “Game Over Woyane” is a response to a propaganda message and photo captioned: “Eritreans living in the diaspora cheering to a song that says ‘Terrorize them, until they say, Master, you make them kneel on their knees’. Known for their cruelty and doing despicable things in Tigray, they boast through such fascist songs” (Figure 10.17, @HeranTigray. Jan 20, 2023). The picture of the truck with the Eritrean military leaving Tigray after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement (Figure 1016) was spread widely on social media. The picture shows Eritrean supporters wrapped in Eritrean flags, celebrating and dancing at the thought that Tigrayan people have been brought down on “their knees” (Figure 10.17).

Identities

Identities in the discourse are assigned to people as a result of similarities or differences with the speaker or writer in language, socialisation, political views, religion, and other classifications (Gee, 1999). Given that various actors with different languages participated in the Tigray war, language can serve as one of the indicators of the identity of the graffiti writers.

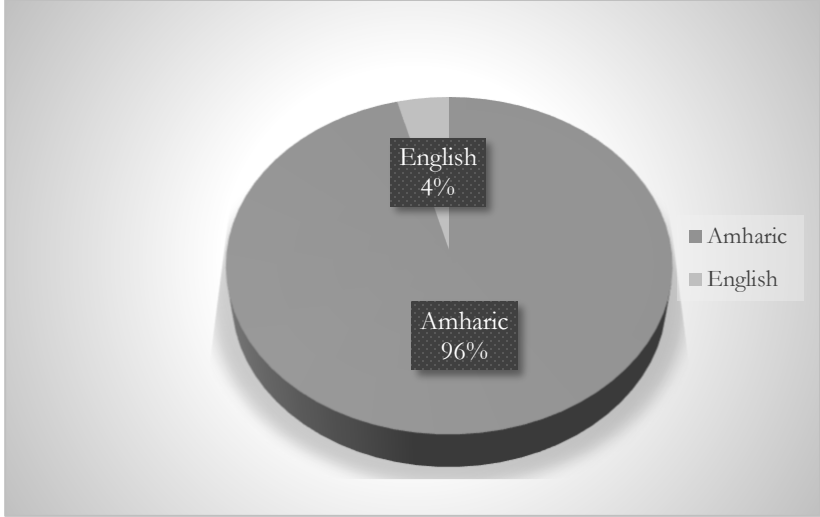


Figure 10.18. Frequency of language employed in the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School (n=83)

In the Emperor Yohannes School, 96% of the graffiti was written in Amharic, while the remaining 4% was a combination of Amharic and English or only English. An example of a graffiti in English is shown in Figure 10.19.

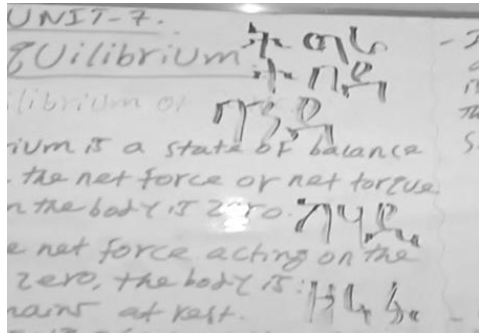


Figure 10.19. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: English language

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti also provides indicators of identity. One of the graffiti in the school (Figure 10.20) reads:

አገላዚ ኮሚንደንትና ልዩ ኃይሎች ጠቅላይ መምሪያ

General Military Department of Agazi Commando and Special Forces

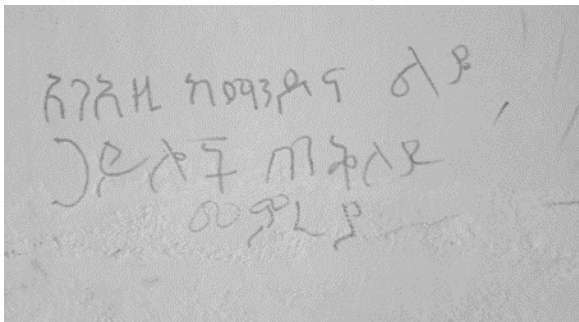


Figure 10.20. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: General Military Department of Agazi Commando and Special Forces

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Another indicator is the list of soldiers found in a classroom of Emperor Yohannes School. The handwritten list of two pages

contains the names of 44 soldiers. The names written in these papers are common names used in Ethiopia.

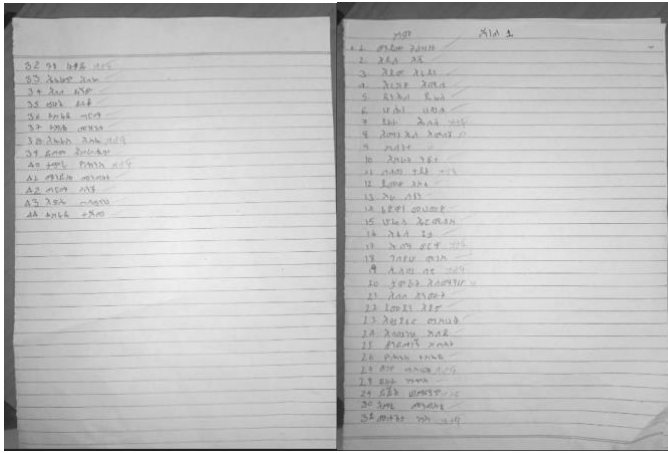


Figure 10.21. List of soldiers found in Emperor Yohannes School
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

In an interview, a member of the Emperor Yohannes School community said that “the soldiers who captured the Emperor Yohannes School were battalions from the 24th Regiment of the ENDF. Rosters of soldiers’ list and other indicators also confirm the same” (IDI01, 13 May 2024, phone interview with Tesfa). The interviewee said:

as soon as the soldiers left the school we found computers that had a tag of the Martyrs Memorial Museum while people in the museum also sent us some of our computers thrown in the compound of the museum. (IDI01, 13 May 2024, phone interview with Tesfa)

This showed that the ENDF soldiers camped in the Martyr’s Commemoration Museum and those in the Emperor Yohannes School were likely to have been in contact with each other and exchanged items.

Signs of the Eritrea military participation in the invasion were left on the walls of the Geru Sirnay Primary Hospital. The picture in Figure 10.22 was taken on 9 July 2023. The graffiti written on the wall was left after the soldiers demolished the hospital. The graffiti reads:

ኤርትራ ትሰዕር ኣያ ወይን?

Eritrea is winning. Hopeless Woyane.

The more general sense of the text can be interpreted as Eritrea winning the battles in Tigray. The accompanying graffiti “ኣያ ወይን?” can be translated as “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”, mocking the Tigrayan people as an ethnic group.



Figure 10.22. Graffiti on the wall of Gerhu Simay Hospital. Tigrinya: Eritrea is winning. Hopeless Woyane
(Captured on 9 July 2023)

Pictures of the health facility in Gerhy Simay show that it was heavily damaged and ransacked (Figure 10.23).



Figure 10.23. Overview of pictures of the destruction of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital

(Captured on 9 July 2023)

The destruction enhances the meaning of the graffiti, which points to the narrative, namely, that Tigrayans have been attacked by Eritrea and that they have not been able to defend themselves.

Relationships

As one of the building blocks of discourse analysis, relationships explain how the meaning, context, language, and intertextuality are used to either build and sustain or change/destroy social relationships (Gee, 1999).

Portraying Tigrayans as a non-human out-group, which is compared to human Ethiopians, the graffiti represents Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, ‘liars’, ‘farts’, ‘thieves’, ‘cowards’, ‘punishers’, ‘dirty’, ‘daylight hyena’, ‘numb’, ‘patient’ as well as part of ‘the tribe of poverty’.

An offensive graffiti (Figure 10.24) found in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ትሆናም ጻላ

Bedbug tsila

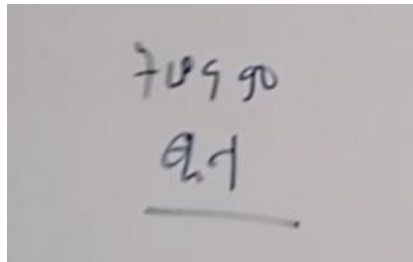


Figure 10.24. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bedbug tsila

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Tsila is a derogatory word that is used to identify or characterise Tigrayans as being different from other Ethiopians. Tsila is slang used in the major cities in Ethiopia and by other Ethiopians (not Tigrayans), who are involved (for instance, as part of law enforcement

or intelligence) to identify Tigrayans. Initially ‘Tsila’ may be a reference – a hidden transcript – to identify potential snitches. The term ‘Tsila’ is not a new term used in the war, it has been used to refer to Tigrayans for at least a decade. The term began as a coded communication so that another person would not understand what was being referred to. In the context of the graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes School, the term ‘Tsila’ demeans Tigrayans. ‘Tsila’ singles out Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

Associating Tigrayans with poverty (contradicting the other message that Tigrayans enriched themselves and have stolen from others), the following graffiti (Figure 10.25) reads:

የደህ ዘር ሁላ ትግራይ ኑር ከሚሉኝ ወጭ ሃገር ብሰይድ ይሻለኛል

The tribe of poverty; I prefer to migrate overseas than living in Tigray.

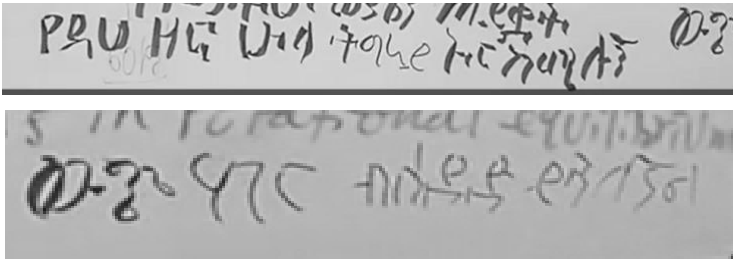


Figure 10.25. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The tribe of poverty

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

In contrast with the above ‘tribe of poverty’ message, the graffiti below identifies Tigrayans as ‘liars’:

ትግራይ እርሃብ የለም

There is no hunger in Tigray. It is fake.

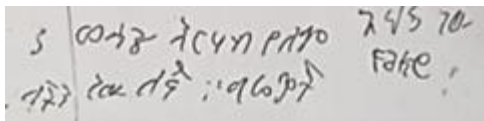


Figure 10.26. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: There is no hunger in Tigray

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Sexually explicit demeaning messages were also found. The sexually explicit words were associate with ‘Woyane’, ‘Tigrayans’, ‘Junta’, and ‘TPLF’.



Figure 10.27. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Sexually explicit graffiti

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

A sexist graffiti, effeminising Tigrayans as a way of reducing their worth, reads “Woyane Tigrayan fu**.” Another expression “ወያኔ ግግታም ቅን**ም” means “Woyane Garbage, Big Clit**”. The sexually explicit language, equating Tigrayans with physical women, uses sexist categories of subjugation to degrade.

Politics

According to Gee (1999), in discourse politics, meanings, writings and conversations can be used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods. The graffiti expressions used key references, such as ‘Woyane’, ‘Junta’, ‘TPLF’, and ‘ethnic Tigrayans’ to attribute responsibility, particularly for the actions of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime. These references are associated with ‘sneak’, ‘snitch’, ‘thief’, ‘cannibals’, ‘power losers’, ‘coward’, ‘racist’, and ‘hunchback dog’.

A graffiti found in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ሰው በሎች ናቸው ወያኔ ማለት የአገሪቱን ንብረት ሲበዘብዝ የኖረ ሌባ አጃው ቡድን አገሩን የሚከዳ ሌባ ቡድን ነው ወያኔ ማለት የመከላከያን ገንዘብና ንብረት ሲሰርቅ የኖረ በመዋሪኤ ሆነ በሌላ አመክንዮ ሲዘርፍ የኖረ ጁንታ ቡድን ነው አሁን ግን አቢቃለት ዘረፋም ሆነ ሌላ ነገር የለም ግፍ ሰርቶ ሞተ ቂጡን ተ ዳ በመላጣ!!!!*

*They are cannibals. Woyane means a group that was looting the country's resources that already betrayed one's own nation. Woyane is a junta group that used to rob the military's finances and resources by requesting contributions and other forms. Now it is over. There is no looting and other crimes. It is already dead while committing crime. Get fu***d in naked an*s!!!*

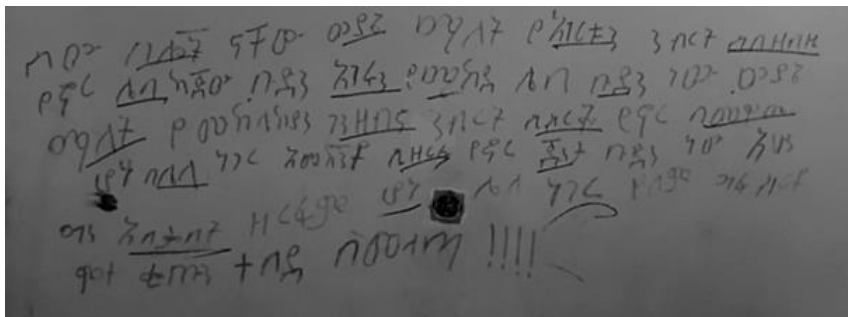


Figure 10.28. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Looting the country's resources

(Captured on 15 April 2021)

It carries the message that the political game of the Tigray people is over, ‘finished’ – a theme that is also expressed in other texts. These graffiti represent Tigrayans as ‘cannibals’, thus framing Tigrayans as non-humans, even anti-humans, who eat other peoples. These expressions contribute to the mobilisation of people against Tigrayans to protect themselves.

Some of the graffiti writings mocked the death of TPLF leaders, showing the dehumanisation of the TPLF leadership in the mind of the authors of the graffiti. In the graffiti image below, a Tigrayan former Chief of Army, Samora, who fought on the side of Ethiopian PM Abiy during the Tigray war, was mentioned in derogatory claims alongside the TPLF leadership. The graffiti (Figure 10.29) reads:

አባይ ጸሐዩ ደብረ ጺወን ጌታቸዉ እረዳ ሳምራ ሌባ ታደሰ ወረደ ሰባት ነጋ የሌቦች መንጋ በተረፈ ሰማይ ቤት ለመሄድ እንኳን አቢቃችሁ ከጥንት አንስቶ ለምንድ ነዉ ሁል ጊዜ ሀገራችሁን ትኩዳላችሁ ባንዳ ናችሁ ለምን ትኖራላችሁ ቢቃ ኢትዮጵያን ተዋት ልቀቋት

The Abay Tsebaye, Debretsion, Getachew Reda, and Samora thefts; Sibhat Nega the gang of thieves. Anything else to say congratulations on your passing away. Since

ancient times, why do you always betray your country? You are bandits whom there is no need of your existence. No more leave Ethiopia alone.

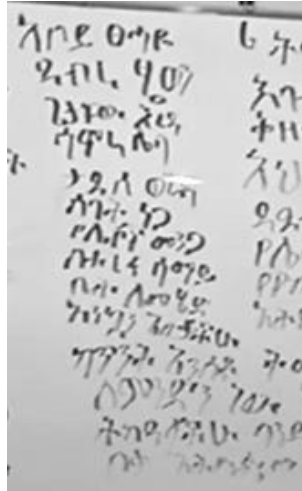


Figure 10.29. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

This indicates that these hate speech utterances are not only directed at those who refused to work with Abiy Ahmed; it rather directed to all Tigrayans as an ethnic group.

Another excerpt (figure 10.30) reads:

አህያው ትሬን ብ*ት ከአ100 ሺህ ትግሬ አንድ ውሻ ይሻላል

*Tigrayan the donkey; Fu** him. One dog is better than 1,000 Tigrayans.*

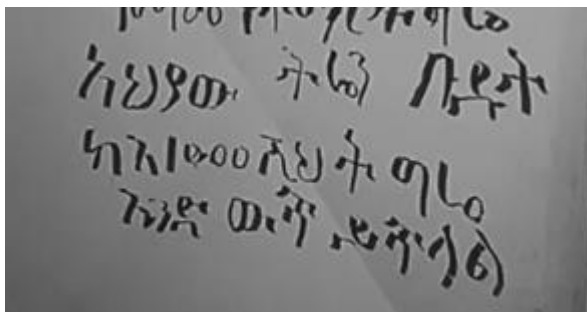


Figure 10.30. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayan the donkey

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

Another graffiti (Figure 10.31) gives a more distinct qualification

ትግሬ ማለት እባብ ነጩ ቅዝናም ሌባ ፈሳም አህያ ሌባ ሹጣም ደደብ ልክሰክሰ የሌባው የባንዳው የሮሃንስ ዘር ናችሁ ኢትዮጵያን የማትወዱ ትግሬ ኢትዮጵያን አትወዱም።

Tigrayan means snake, coward, thief, fart, donkey, thief, stupid. It is because you are the tribes of the bandit Yohannes that you don't like Ethiopia. Tigrayans don't like Ethiopia.

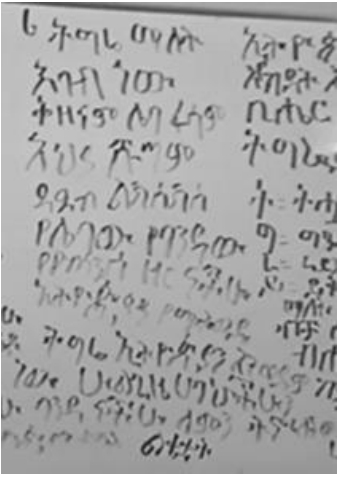


Figure 10.31. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

This qualification also speaks to the interpretation that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians. They are different and less worthy to be Ethiopians, not worthy to live on the Earth.

The graffiti left in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School gives some clear reading of the term ‘Woyane’ as an ethnic group that does not belong to Ethiopia, which has undesirable treacherous traits, and the dehumanising messages portrays the meaning that the Tigray people are not worthy of existence. Some messages would seem to identify genocidal intent, such as in for instance: “there is no need for your existence” (Figure 10.29).

Connections

Connections refer to how meaning, language, and discourses are used to make things and people connected or disconnected from each

other (Gee, 1999). Through graffiti, the soldiers connected Tigrayans with animals, immoral practices, and non-human behaviours. The corpus of messages reveals strong hate speech, singling out Tigrayans as a lesser group, and blaming Tigrayans as a whole for all of the bad things in Ethiopia. There are also overt genocidal messages. The graffiti portrayed Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, ‘rats’, ‘daytime hyenas’, and ‘cannibals’ which must be ‘eradicated’. The graffiti in Figure 32 reads:

ትግሬን ማመን ቀብሮ ገሎ ነው

To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.



Figure 10.32. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The above aggressive graffiti speaks to the same intent of eradication of all the Tigrayans. A similar message is conveyed in this graffiti (Figure 10.33):

ትግሬ ይውደም ያለም ኮሮና

Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.

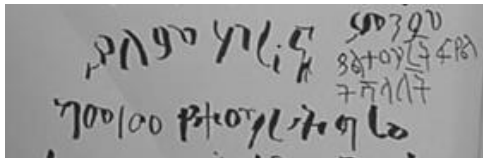


Figure 10.33. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: The Coronavirus of the world

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti makes a reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a killer-virus that took the world by surprise in 2020–2021, the same time as when this graffiti was written.

Another graffiti (Figure 10.34) reads:

ገንፋናም ትግሬ የሚባል ብሄር ኢትዮጵያዊ አይለም

The Tigray (Tigrayan) ethnicity is not Ethiopian.

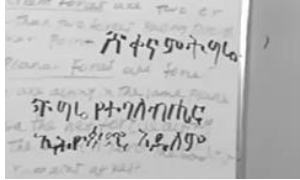


Figure 10.34. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School

(Captured on 17 April 2021)

A mocking sign is left on a school form of a teacher’s lesson plan, which is filled out as:

Teacher: TPLF

Department: Patient



Figure 10.35. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: TPLF – patient

(Captured on 17 April 2021)

That education should not be associated with Tigrayans, who are portrayed as stupid, speaks from this one:

ትግሬ ቢማርም 0+0=0 ነገጢ

Whatever Tigrayan learns, it is all the same. You cannot get different number in the sum of $0+0=0$.

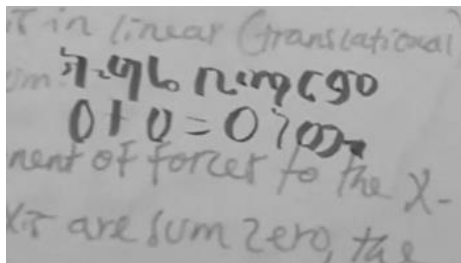


Figure 10.36. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: $0+0=0$
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

One graffiti written in English reads (Figure 10.37):

*Learning is burning for Tigray Nation So Woyane Double Fu***

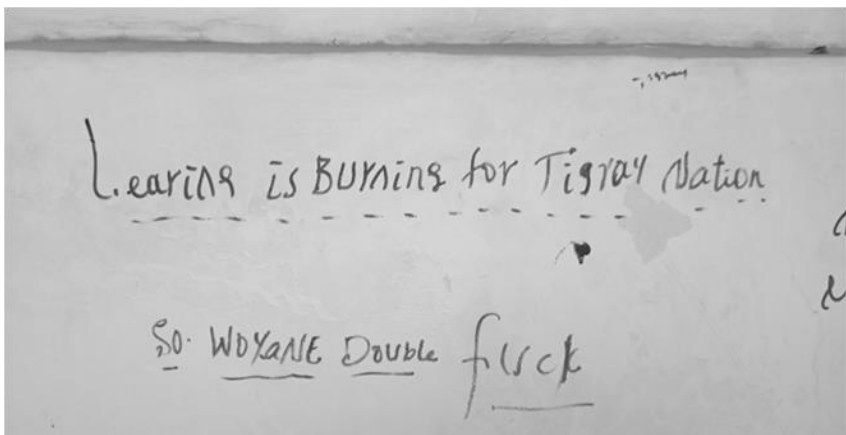
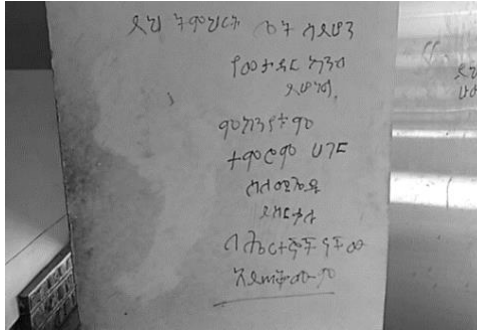


Figure 10.37. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Learning is burning
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

Another graffiti adds to this theme, by identifying a reason why the school should no longer be used (Figure 10.38):

ይህ ትምህርት ቤት ሳይሆን የወታደር ካምፕ ይሆናል። ምክንያቱም ተምህርም ሃገር ስለሚጎዱ ይሰርቃሉ ብሄርተኞች ናቸው አይጠቅሙም።

This will no longer continue as a school. This is because their learning was utilised to exploit the country. They are useless ethnocentrists.



**Figure 10.38. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: useless
ethnocentrists**
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

The reference to ‘ethnocentrists’ reflects the ethnic hatred that is surfacing in the graffiti texts in reference to the Tigray ethnic group.

Sign systems and ways of knowledge

The last element of studying text is to identify what sign systems and ways of knowledge are referenced (Gee, 1999). In the graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes School, Tigrayans are presented as a danger to Ethiopia. The conclusion that is drawn from this is clear. It reads:

አሁን የቀረን ትግሬን ማጥፋት ነው።

Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.



Figure 10.39. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Now, the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

After the war, the term ‘Pretoria’ has a new significance in Tigray, following the signing of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities on 2 November 2022. This is clear in the semiotic landscape. A few clubs and restaurants put up signboards with a name referencing ‘Pretoria’. The picture below was taken on 9 September 2023. The text is in Tigrinya and in English. The Pretoria Nightclub is a reference to the Pretoria Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities. It reveals the resumption of normal life and pleasure, but it is also possibly, with a sense of irony, pointing to the unresolved outstanding issues.



Figure 10.40. Pretoria Nightclub: Pretoria Night Club
(Captured on 9 September 2023)

The sense of irony comes immediately to mind when someone in Tigray is shown the picture, and he responds:

Ha

Is the drink needed to not even visualize how the Pretoria Agreement squashed justice for victims, wherever they are?

So, as not to come into one's real sense that all these crimes happened but nothing is done about them.

Thanks for sharing. (WhatsApp message to MvR, 9 February 2024)

These are perceived as amusing, but also serious pointers to the new period following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. Whether permanent or temporary, the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement stopped the war, but was unable to bring about accountability and justice. It has not developed into a peace agreement. In many places in Tigray, other than Mekelle, the guns have not stopped, and the occupation continued up to the time of publishing. Hence, the 'Pretoria Night Club' may be a sign that Tigrayans are alive and kicking, that a new status quo has seen the light of day, but that the knowledge of a project to eradicate Tigrayans, is still written on the wall.

Discussion: The central image of the hyena

The portrayal of Tigrayans as adherents of the Devil (666), as observed in the Emperor Yohannes School, parallels the characterization of Tigrayans as "Buda," a term documented in the Martyr's Commemoration Museum (see Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). In the cultural contexts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly among the Amhara and Tigrinya ethnic groups, "Buda" carries a specific and culturally significant connotation. It denotes a belief in a malevolent force akin to the evil eye, often linked to individuals perceived to possess the ability to transform into animals, especially hyenas, and inflict harm through their gaze or presence (Baynes-Rock, 2015). These individuals are believed to inherit supernatural powers capable of causing illness, misfortune, or even death, typically through possession or witchcraft (Teklemariam, u.d.). Froyen (2013) provides

a comprehensive interpretation of the Ethiopian belief in Buda¹, suggesting that it embodies a complex interplay of culture, ecology, medicine, psychological concepts, religion, and social relations. Froyen further posits that the uneasy coexistence between humans and spotted hyenas mirrors the tensions between majority and minority groups within the Ethiopian context, although she also notes that Buda can manifest in other close interpersonal relationships.

Both references, “666” and “Buda” speak to undercurrents of cultural religious beliefs and practices, which relate to spiritual powers, such as the evil eye and the power of possession. These also closely relate to the curse of ‘hyena’, which is the transformative power of ‘Buda’. The graffiti, therefore, evoke beliefs and fears, as an undercurrent and background to the overtly political content of the messages.

The graffiti investigated in this study reveals a strong pattern of ‘othering’ of Tigrayans, who are referred to with dehumanising terminology. The graffiti explicitly evokes hate and openly calls for the eradication of Tigrayans. The text authored by members of the Eritrean military confirms their presence in Tigray during the war, as well as their intent, and reiterates the political slogan introduced by President Isayas: ‘Game over, Woyane’. The analysis shows how the military repeats the slogans and texts used by the political leadership.

While the graffiti points to egregious consequences, including the eradication of ethnic Tigrayans, humour or irony is also employed. This is also the case in the graffiti by Mekelle civilians referencing the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in a tone that can be interpreted in various ways, but often as a parody of the importance of the Pretoria Agreement.

Conclusion

This research examined the graffiti written by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. The soldiers used derogatory and dehumanising terms for Tigrayans: ‘cannibal’, ‘snitch’, ‘daytime hyena’, ‘rat’, ‘bedbug’, ‘traitor’,

¹ Froyen (2013) defines Buda as: “the ‘evil eye’ belief or the person who can attack or “eat” people by means of a certain kind of communication of the eyes that transfers evil spirits that are believed to cause illness.”

‘thief’, and ‘devil’. The graffiti directly calls for the eradication of Tigrayans. The code 666, referring to possession by the Devil, is used, justifying the eradication of the Tigray people.

Some of the hate speech in the graffiti was already used in public transcripts and official communications of the leaders of Ethiopia (‘Tigrayans are daytime hyena’) and Eritrea (‘Game over, Woyane’). These were instrumental in mobilising people against Tigrayans. The slogan ‘Game over, Woyane’, which President Isayas introduced on 14 January 2018 – almost two years before the war began – is repeated in the graffiti left by Ethiopians. It indicates the influence of this slogan on the preparation of the military for the war. Eritrean soldiers wrote on the wall of a hospital that they destroyed in Tigray that Eritrea was winning, indicating purposeful involvement and intent to be in this alliance.

That the war is not over is signalled by the banner on a truck filled with Eritrean military leaving Tigray after the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, containing the warning ‘Game over, Woyane’. Displaying this slogan contains a threat, that the job of eradicating Tigrayans is not over implying that they plan to continue. The uncertain future for the people of Tigray under the Pretoria Agreement is highlighted in a signboard in Mekelle announcing the ‘Pretoria Night Club’. This irreverent name shows the lack of faith that the people of Tigray have in the Agreement. With a sense of irony, the name ‘Pretoria Night Club’ also highlights the dark side of the current situation in Tigray, in which the people of Tigray are left dealing with trauma, heavy losses, and the continued occupation of important territories, while those committing war times atrocities enjoy impunity.

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Authors' contributions

The research originates from Daniel Tesfa, who prepared the original concept for it, prepared the research plan, carried out the collection of the data and the analysis. Daniel Tesfa also established the theoretical framework. Daniel Tesfa wrote the first draft of the chapter. This research is part of his PhD research. Mirjam Van Reisen provided guidance on the research at all stages, and reviewed the raw data, the data analysis and contributed to the writing of all versions of the article. Araya Abrha Medhanyie contributed the picture of the sign board of the Pretoria Night Club. Daniel Tesfa did the interview with a staff of Pretoria Night Club and cross-verified the picture and its meaning.

Ethical clearance

This research is carried out under the research titled "Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting", with ethical clearance REDC 2020.139.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions' (Book 1).

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