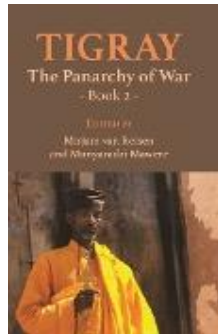


‘Cannibals’, ‘Daytime Hyenas’, and ‘Not a Human Race’ – ‘Woyane’:
The Semiotic Landscape of the Martyrs’
Commemoration Museum

Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	xi
Note on Content and Editorial Decisions	xiii
Acronyms.....	xxii
Timeline of Key Events	xxiv
Introduction to this Book.....	1
Chapter 1: Imagining a World without War: The Activation of Gender as a Critical Concept.....	7
<i>Mirjam Van Reisen, Gebru Kidanu, Luana Stocker & Julia Duncan-Cassell</i>	
Chapter 2: A Secret Deal to Conceal: The Eritrean Involvement in the Tigray War.....	53
<i>Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Kai Smits</i>	
Chapter 3: ‘Cannibals’, ‘Daytime Hyenas’, and ‘Not a Human Race’ – ‘Woyane’: The Semiotic Landscape of the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum	101
<i>Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 4: Negative Stereotyping, Creation of a Threat, and Incitement to Genocide: Discourse Analysis of Hate-speech Disseminated in the Tigray War.....	145
<i>Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 5: “We Pray to God for Peace to be Restored”: The Systematic Destruction of Cultural and Religious Heritage in Tigray	187
<i>B. G. Kabsay, Moges Gebreegzjabber Woldu & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 6: “Why is God Silent?”: Damage and Destruction of Religious Heritage Sites in East Tigray.....	217
<i>Hagos Gebremariam & Amanuel Abrha</i>	
Chapter 7: Deliberate Destruction: Targeting Symbols of Cultural and Religious Identity in Tigray	289
<i>B. G. Kabsay, Habtom Teklay Shifare & A.H. Tefera</i>	

Chapter 8: ‘The Child of Fire is Ash’: The Lack of a Human Rights Culture317

B. G. Kabsay

Chapter 9: ‘Everything that Held us Together is Now in Ruins’: Exodus and Dissatisfaction after the Peace Agreement in Tigray: A Personal Narrative 339

Tom Claes

Chapter 10: War Makes States: From ‘Game Over’ to the Idea of Tigray Statehood.....351

Meressa Tsehay Gebrenahd, Mirjam Van Reisen & Daniel Tesfa

About the Authors and Editors401

‘Cannibals’, ‘Daytime Hyenas’, and ‘Not a Human Race’ – ‘Woyane’:

The Semiotic Landscape of the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum

Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reizen

መልሐስ ዓፅሚ የብላን ግን ዓፅሚ ትሰብር።

The tongue doesn’t have a bone, but it can break a bone.

Abstract

After the 2020–2022 Tigray war, there were 154 pieces of graffiti discovered on the walls and artefacts in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum in Mekelle, Ethiopia. The museum, which celebrated the victory of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) over the Derg regime in 1991, was ransacked and used as a military encampment by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). A total of 142 pieces of graffiti were analysed for this chapter, using discourse analysis. It was found that the term ‘Woyane’, originally a positive reference to TPLF victories in previous times, was used negatively to apply not only to the TPLF, but Tigrayan people in general. In the graffiti, the term ‘Woyane’ was associated with dehumanising references. The people of Tigray were blamed for the ills in Ethiopia and portrayed as a danger and a threat to peace. This served as a justification for their eradication. The eradication of the ‘Woyane’ emerges from the graffiti as an important theme, indicating such intent as a sub-text to the 2020–2022 war.

Keywords: Woyane, graffiti, discourse analysis, Ethiopia, Tigray, genocidal intent, Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum

Introduction

The intelligibility of war, particularly the rhyme and reasons for it, requires analysis of the signs left in the arena in which it took place. A sign is any image, text, sound, or event that points to something that conveys meaning. A sign communicates; it holds a symbolic power that carries meaning, to those who have access to the symbolic system. To reveal the meaning in signs, there must be access to the symbolic meaning that is revealed to an audience that is part of the social interaction in which the meaning is conveyed. This requires, first and foremost, a study of empirical material evidence of the war.

The siege imposed during the Tigray war ensured that little empirical information about what happened in the arena could be communicated (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). This disabled the collection, analysis, and interpretation of events, including what resulted from them and why they took place. A siege is able to regulate which audiences can see which images and at what time. A siege leaves ambiguity about who the participants are in the war, who is perpetrating which actions, and the attribution of voice, authorship, and ownership of events. A siege creates a black hole, in which the material evidence of a situation is not empirically available in any form and in which the communication is entirely regulated by gatekeepers, who may have a particular stake in or view of the situation (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024).

The imposition of the siege during the war in Tigray, which stopped all sharing of communication on what was taking place, was a critical event. While the end of hostilities could be regarded as a critical event, so was the lifting of the siege (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). When a siege is lifted, observations, pictures, texts, and recordings collected from different places inside and outside the arena of war, and online and offline, can be analysed, compared, interpreted in their context and triangulated with other material. How places are left – the under script of the events revealed in language in the form of graffiti, banners or signs – is critical to understanding the meaning of what happened (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). The work to investigate the war through empirical material is critically important in the process of recording what happened and investigating the potential

hypotheses or conclusions about the rhyme and reasons for the war. The ‘reasons’ – the why – is usually communicated in symbolic language; the ‘rhyme’ needs to be unwrapped and contextualised, to access the meaning that is conveyed to a particular audience.

The Tigray war, which took place from 2020 to 2022, was conducted under an almost near-complete siege. The Internet was closed for long periods; international organisations were severely restricted in their operations; and journalists were not allowed to visit and report and were often discouraged from publishing news reports on the situation (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). Now, there is the possibility of entering the semiotic landscape and observing what was left behind. This allows analysis to recognise patterns that point to reasoning about what happened and what it meant. This allows the researchers to (re-)enter the arena of the war and seek the symbolic meaning. This is a declaration of solidarity with those who lived it, as we seek an insider’s understanding of what took place and why. The objective is to reveal the situation by recognising the inner symbolic structure of it. It provides acceptance that there is meaning in what happened during the war to those who lived in the war.

Hence, following the lifting of the siege, after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities on 2 November 2022 (AU, 2022), there is now the possibility to collect, interpret, and triangulate material that speaks to key elements of the political intentions of the war. This study seeks to identify the rhyme and reasons of the Tigray war by investigating the semiotic landscape in relation to key events.

Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers used public places including historical places, schools, health facilities, etc. as military camps. Soldiers of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) camped in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle for seven months, from the first week of December 2020 to mid-June 2021. The soldiers wrote various graffiti on the walls of the museum. Taking graffiti writings as one of the real-time indicators of the war moment and the drives into it, this chapter examines the following research question: *What is the content of the graffiti left by the soldiers who camped in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle?*

Theoretical framework

Discourse analysis

The term ‘discourse’, as indicated by Gee (1999), covers important aspects of what others have called: discourse (Foucault, 1966); communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); cultural communities (Clark, 1996); discourse communities (Bizzell, 1992); distributed knowledge or distributed systems (Hutchins, 1995); thought collectives (Fleck, 1979); practices (Bourdieu, 1990); cultures (Geertz, 1973); activity systems (Engeström *et al.*, 1999); and actor-actant networks (Latour, 2005).

According to Gee (1999), discourse involves:

a) situated identities; b) ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; c) ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; d) characteristic ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking listening (and, in some Discourses, reading-and-writing, as well).
(Gee, 1999, P 40)

A discourse analysis is based on the details of speech (and gaze, gesture and action) or writing that are arguably deemed *relevant* in the context and which are relevant to the arguments that the analysis is attempting to make (Gee, 1999).

According to Gee (1999), discourse analysis needs to examine four basic questions to understand the discourse of a given content and the language used in the discourse:

- What situated meaning or meanings for a given word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to their ‘author’, considering the point of view of the discourse in which words were used?
- What situated meaning or meanings for a given word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to those who are listening to or reading these words or phrases, again considering the discourse in which these words are used?
- What situated meaning or meanings for a word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to those who are listening to or reading these words or phrases, from the point of view of

other discourses than the one in which the words were uttered or written?

- What situated meaning or meanings to words or phrases can be reasonably attributed to a discourse, recognising the meaning associated in other discourses, irrespective of whether or not we have evidence that anyone actually prompted that activity in the current case at hand?

Building upon these questions, we employed seven aspects (revised edition, Gee, 1999) as tasks and tools of inquiry as explained in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Discourse analysis building blocks

#	Analysis criteria	Definition of analysis criteria
1	Significance	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations emerge to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?
2	Practices (activities)	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations are employed to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?
3	Identities	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations are used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?
4	Relationships	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?
5	Politics	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations being used to create, distribute, or withhold social

#	Analysis criteria	Definition of analysis criteria
		goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as 'good' or 'acceptable' or not?
6	Connections	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversation being used to make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?
7	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, other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing?

Source: Based on Gee (1999)

Intertextuality

Intertextuality deals with how meaning is driven from a given discourse context. According to Fairclough:

Intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth. (Fairclough 1992, p. 84)

There are different types of intertextualities. Manifest intertextuality refers to texts that are explicitly presented within each genre, including text, audio, and video content. They are manifestly cued by features on the surface of the text (Fairclough, 1992). On the other hand, constitutive intertextuality refers to the configuration of discourse conventions that implicitly contribute to the production of text (Fairclough, 1992).

In providing interpretations of the graffiti writings, this chapter employs manifest intertextuality to understand the surface-level meaning of the graffiti while constitutive intertextuality is employed when the graffiti has a meaning that is deeper than is conveyed directly in the literal words, and where an explanation of the meaning in the context of the war is required for interpretation.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Tigray, a northern state of Ethiopia. Key empirical imagery material was collected, revisited, compared, and selected for further inspection. The research employed quantitative discourse analysis aiming to examine the trends across the content, together with qualitative analysis of the graffiti images to understand the explicit and implicit insights behind the collected content. Following Kroon (2024), the following steps were taken to conduct this research:

- Synopsis of observations, written texts, and audio recordings
- Selection of meaningful parts by reading and re-reading
- Litteral transcription
- Selection of possible key incidents
- Concrete instances of the workings of abstract principles of social organisation
- Showing the relation between the part and the whole
- Having the potential to make explicit a theoretical 'loading'
- Construction of key incidents and transcripts
- Key incident analysis
- Triangulation
- Understanding (Kroon, 2024)

The methods of data collection and analysis are indicated in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Method of data collection and analysis

Criteria	Approach
Study subject	Graffiti images written by soldiers
Method of data collection	Capturing photos, observation, and in-depth interview
Sites of data collection	Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle
Data collection date	24 April 2024
Number of collected data	154
Exclusion criteria	Duplication and blurredness of image
Number of duplications data	12 (4 blurred graffiti that the researcher could not read and 8 duplications)
Number of data used	142
Coding and procedures following	The images of the graffiti expressions were first converted to a computer and then transcribed and translated. The translations were conducted by the first author who captured the photos. The second and third authors crosschecked the translations as compared to the images.
In-depth interviews	IDI01, 11 January 2022 IDI02, 24 April 2024 IDI03, 9 May 2024
Analysis procedures	Discourse analysis was employed through brainstorming the content and outlining major points that led to building the major themes that were grasped from the data.

The frequency of attribution of the pieces of graffiti was examined against Gee's discourse analysis criteria, significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections as well as sign systems and knowledge.

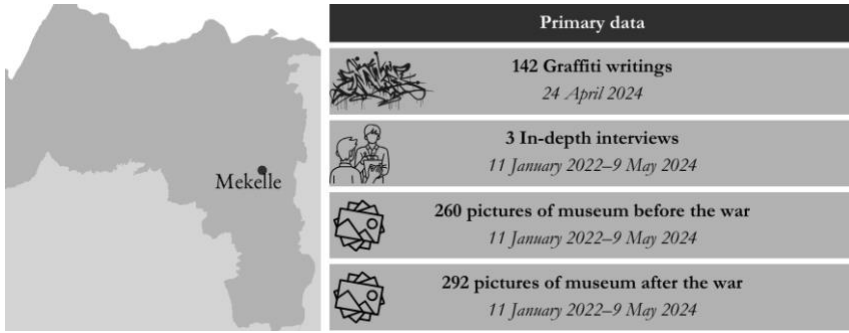


Figure 3.1. Overview of data collected and used in this study

A list of all 142 artefacts of graffiti was made, which provided: (i) the photograph; (ii) the place, (iii) text scripted in the original language, (iv) the original language, (v) text in English translation, (vi) building block of discourse analysis referred, (vii) context and comments, and (ix) interpretation. The translation was carried out three times and validated by a panel of judges; if there were any major differences, these were discussed and, where necessary, indicated in the findings.

A corpus of photographs of the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum was captured on 3 February 2020 (before the war) by the third author, in view of a potential threat to the museum as a target if the war broke out in Tigray. The fear of the author was that the museum could be destroyed and, therefore, detailed photographs were taken of the objects on display in the museum. This is a corpus of 260 pictures. Duplicates or blurred pictures were removed from the corpus. Photographs of the museum archive after the war were obtained on 24 April 2024 for analysis, sent by the curator of the museum. This is a corpus of 292 pictures. Duplicates were removed from the corpus received. The first author visited the museum on 24 April 2024 for a field visit. Photographs were seen of the graffiti in the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum on 13 May 2024 (photos made for MO Magazine), to compare with the body received from the curator of the museum. Interviews were undertaken on 11 January 2022, 24 April 2024 and 9 May 2024 to help interpret the photographic and field visit data.

Results and findings

Guided by Gee's (1999) discourse analysis building blocks and tools of inquiry, the research analysed graffiti writings collected from public spaces in Tigray. This section presents the context of the Martyrs' Memorial Museum before the war, the graffiti written by soldiers while it was serving as a military base during the war, as well as interpretation of these graffiti writings.

Transition to war: The site of the Martyrs' Memorial Museum

Before the war, the Martyrs' Memorial Museum was Tigray's pride. The museum is in the centre of Mekelle, next to a dominating statue commemorating the victory of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) over the Derg. The Museum presented an overview of the history of the TPLF, specifically the TPLF resistance to the Derg through the exhibition of photographs and other artefacts. The TPLF eventually defeated the Derg in 1991.



Figure 3.2. Pictures of the exhibition in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum

(Photographs captured on 3 February 2020)

The photographic exhibition portrayed the pride of the TPLF struggle and the participation of the population, including students, women and farmers. The exhibition was not limited to photographs

of battlefields. There were also photographs of the services that the TPLF provided to communities, such as education and health. The photographs on show broadly cover the period 1968–1980. The following photographs are a selection of the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum photographic exhibition before the war.

The museum also exhibited a selection of photographs of the TPLF’s cooperation with the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), which fought against the Derg alongside the TPLF. The pictures in the exhibition gave significance to the joint TPLF-EPLF mission carried out in Sahel in the early 1980s.



Figure 3.3. Eritrean delegation at the first Organizational Conference of the TPLF (1979) and TPLF and EPLF combatants in the Sahel and military leaders fighting the Derg ‘Red Star’ operation (pictures are dated 1974 EC, converted to 1982 GC)

(Photographs captured on 3 February 2020)

The Martyrs’ Memorial Museum documented the good times between TPLF and EPLF, while the complexity of the party-to-party relations continued into cycles of war and uncertainty in the region. The museum also comprised documentation of how the armed struggle in Tigray and Eritrea spread to Afar, Agew, Amhara, and other provinces of Ethiopia.

Following the breakout of the Tigray war in November 2020, the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle served as a military base for ENDF soldiers. During the war, the historical archive documentation of the museum was looted and burned in the compound of the museum. The archive and display rooms served as a living room, kitchen, and store for the soldiers. The military left messages on walls and artefacts, giving insight into their state of mind during their stay in the museum.

Discourse analysis of graffiti writings

Using Gee’s discourse analysis criteria, the graffiti images were analysed using the seven building blocks, as depicted in Figure 3.4.

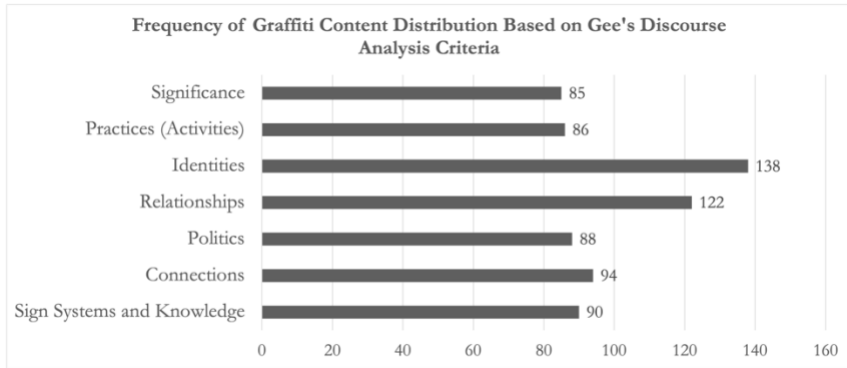


Figure 3.4. Building blocks of content analysis based on Gee’s criteria for discourse analysis (frequency, multiple, n=142)

In the sections below the building blocks of the analysis are further inspected.

Significance

‘Significance’ in discourse analysis describes how languages, meanings, discourses, and conversations are used to build relevance for people and things in each context (Gee, 1999). In the graffiti writings found in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum, the authors of the graffiti indicated 85 times the significance of the law-and-order enforcement operation in Tigray as the only means of protecting Ethiopia’s national interest. Furthermore, the graffiti represented Tigrayans as ‘cannibals’, ‘daytime hyenas’, and ‘not a human race’. This set Tigrayans apart from Ethiopian, referencing them as what can be understood as a non- or anti-Ethiopian being, with the potential to undermine Ethiopians and associated with their eradication from Ethiopia as a strategy to maintain the Ethiopian ‘being’ and foundational moral system.

The graffiti below (Figure 3.5) reads:

ወያኔን ከዚህ ምድር በማጥፋት የኢትዮጵያን ሰላም ማስከበር

By eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace.

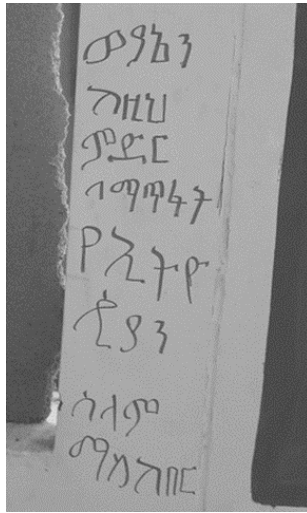


Figure 3.5. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Through eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace’

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti framed ‘Woyane’ as an entity that erodes Ethiopia’s stability. The term ‘Woyane’ was first used as a symbol of the farmers’ uprising in the Tigray province against the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia between May and November 1943. The rebels organised to protect themselves from the Emperor’s appointee governors, who used to loot the produce of farms in the name of it being tribute and a gift to the Emperor. They named their resistance **ቀዳማዊ ወያነ** (and are referred as ‘First Woyane’) (Tareke, 2009) After almost losing the whole province, Emperor Haile Selassie sought the support of the United Kingdom’s Royal Air Force, which ended the most serious internal resistance the regime faced. The ‘Second Woyane’ revolution refers to the TPLF struggle against the Derg regime, which it defeated in 1991 (Abraham, K. (n.d.).

Practices (activities)

As a component of building blocks in discourse analysis, practice explores how meaning, language, and discourse are used to enact activities in context (Gee, 1999). To put the significant discourse of maintaining Ethiopia’s peace through the ‘law and order operation’

into action, the soldiers used 86 attributions to practices, which included utterances such as: ‘the end of Woyane’ and ‘Woyane is non-existent’. These graffiti expressions used the keywords ‘Woyane’, ‘junta’, ‘TPLF’, and ‘ethnic Tigrayans’ to attribute responsibility for the drawbacks of the regime of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The graffiti writings use terms such as ‘thief’, ‘cannibals’, ‘power losers’, ‘cowards’, ‘racist’, and ‘hunchback dog’ to portray Tigrayans.

One of the graffiti writings (Figure 3.6) in the museum reads:

ለውጥ ላለ ለውጥ ባይኖር ኑሮ የካቲት በመጣ ቁጥር እምር ተጋዳላይ በሚለው ዘፈን ጆሮዎ ጎደነቁ ነበር። አዘጋጅ፡ ደ/ ጽዮን ገ/ ሚካኤል የጁንታው ብሔራዊ ክልላዊ መንግስት ር/ መስተዳደር

There is a change. Had it not been I would have heard the cliché Ember Tegadalay [kudos fighter] song every February. Producer D/Tsion G/Mikael the President of Junta National State Government

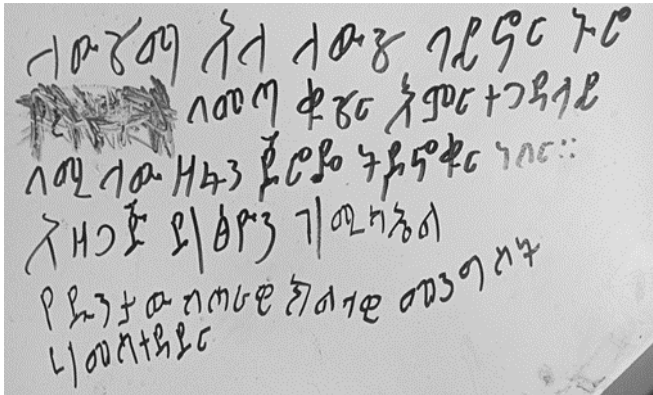


Figure 3.6. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘There is a change. Had it not been I would have heard the cliché Ember Tegadalay [kudos fighter] song every February. Producer D/Tsion G/Mikael the President of Junta National State Government’

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The song Ember Tegadalay (fighter) refers to a military song that celebrates the pride of a Tigrayan fighter of the TPLF fighting the Derg regime. The graffiti references this song, mocking the current TPLF leadership of Tigray Regional State, President Debretsion, associated with the (derogatory) terms of leading a ‘junta’ state.

Some of the graffiti expressions also reflect a sentiment of victimhood, framing the war as an act of revenge by the ‘victims of the EPRDF regime’ against Tigrayans, who are seen as being responsible for the wrongdoings of the past 27 years.

Another graffiti (Figure 3.7) reads:

ህዋት በውሸት ተወልዶ በውሸት ያደገው የሰው ደም ጠጥቶ በደም የሰከረው የገጹሃን አንባ አፈር ዴሜ አበላው። የህዋት ታጋዮች የቆሰሰ የትግል ጓዳቸውን ገንዘብ ዘርፈው ሲጓዙ TPLF combatants traveling many plunder their war comrade

TPLF who was born in a lie and grew up in a lie, drank human blood and was drunk with blood. The tears of innocence made it get destroyed. TPLF fighters stealing money from their wounded comrade. TPLF combatants traveling many plunder their war comrade. [Underlined text in original graffiti printed in English]

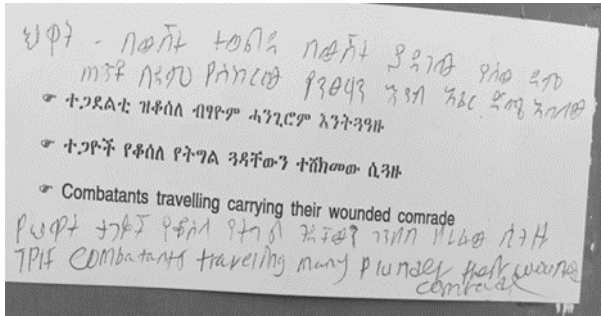


Figure 3.7. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘TPLF who was born in a lie and grew up in a lie, drank human blood and was drunk with blood. The tears of innocence made it get destroyed. TPLF fighters stealing money from their wounded comrade. TPLF combatants travelling many plunder their war comrade (underlined text is printed in English in original graffiti)’

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This text is written as a parody of the subtext to explain a photo in the museum, and the English text mocks the English element of the text in the museum.

There are other pieces of graffiti that reflected the Tigray war as revenge for Tigray’s victory against the Derg regime. The graffiti below (Figure 3.8) reads:

“ወያኔ በውሸትና በማታለል አባቴን አሸነፉ አሲቃዩ እኔ ልጁ በአውነት እና በሀቀኝነት በመስዋትት ወያኔን ላይመለስ ቀበርኩት ድል ለኢትዮጵያ”

Woyane defeated my father with lies and deceptions. I, his son, destroyed Woyane once and for all with truthful and honest sacrifice. Victory for Ethiopia.

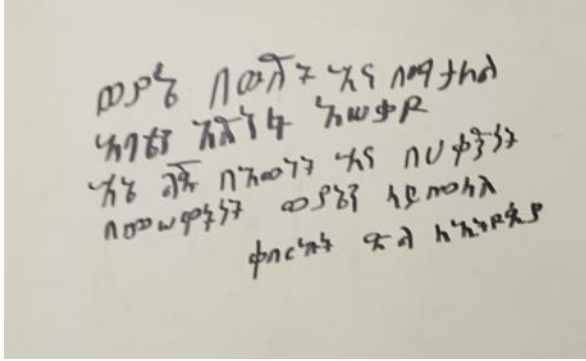


Figure 3.8. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Woyane defeated my father with lies and deceptions. I, his son, destroyed Woyane once and for all with truthful and honest sacrifice. Victory for Ethiopia’

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti indicates that the Tigray war was perceived as retaliation for the TPLF/EPRDF’s nation-building narratives after overthrowing the military regime in 1991. The graffiti indicates that the law and order operation in Tigray is understood to have an intention to redefine the history of Tigray’s armed struggle, which overthrew the Derg regime in Ethiopia.

The practices identified in the graffiti (need to overthrow, punish, take revenge, kill) are accompanied by the arrest and punishment of Tigrayans held in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum. An interviewee testified that he was arrested, held in captivity, and tortured inside the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, 11 January 2022, face-to-face). The interviewee stated that ENDF soldiers used the museum as a detention centre (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January

2022). The interviewee was arrested after he requested the body of a civilian friend killed by an ENDF soldier in Mekelle. He said:

[...] they [the ENDF soldiers] plugged in a socket with electricity and tortured me with electric shocks. (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January 2022)

One of the authors who captured the graffiti pictures from the museum on 24 April 2024, also observed the chairs, chains, and electric sockets along with pieces of clothes in the museum, as shown in the Figure 3.9. The interviewee remembered that the open spaces in the corridors of the museum had electric cables and chain rings attached to the chairs:

As I entered the gate of the museum, they beat me with a rubber band to sit in the chair where they tortured me with the electric cable while handcuffed. (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January 2022)



Figure 3.9. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: chairs and chains to carry out electric shocks in the detention area organised in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

A mother of two who survived arrest, torture, and sexual violence in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum also stated that many of the ENDF

soldiers were using the museum as a military camp as well as a detention centre:

When I was arrested there, the museum was under the control of Regiment 24 of the Ethiopian Army. (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024)

She added:

After torturing us, the soldiers used to select some people from among the detainees, and many of them were never seen again. (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024)

Another interviewee stated that the historical resources in the museum were looted, destroyed, and burned by soldiers inside the compound (Interviewee IDI02, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 24 April 2024). The survivor added:

... seeing them [the ENDF soldiers] writing insults against your identity is also as painful as the torture itself. (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024).

The graffiti is perceived as undermining or destroying the Tigray identity.

Identities

According to Gee (1999), identity in discourse analysis refers to how the speakers or writers of the discourse content identify themselves as socially significant people as compared to the identities of others. Language serves as one of the instruments of identification. Accordingly, among the 142 graffiti images, 121 were written in Amharic, 1 in Arabic, 11 in English, 6 in Oromo, and 3 in Tigrinya languages (Figure 3.10).

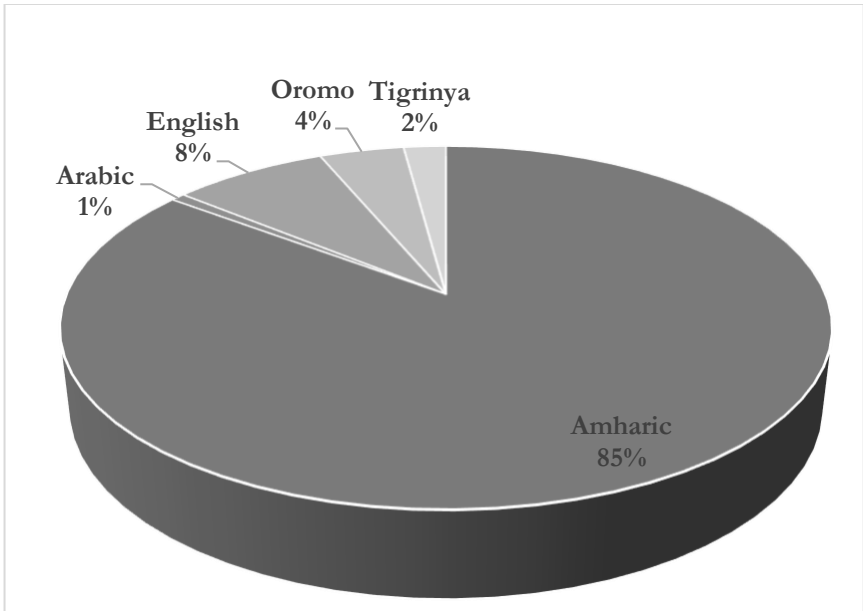


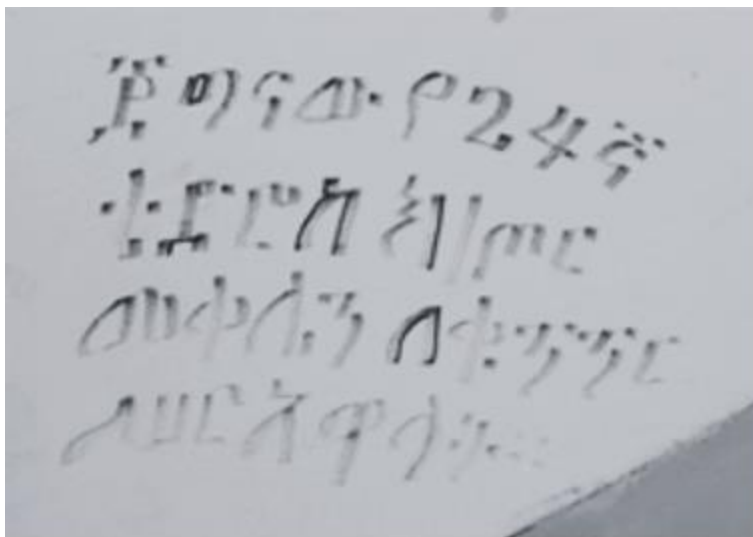
Figure 3.10. Languages used in the graffiti writing in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum (n= 142)

We could identify 138 indicators of the identities of the writers of the graffiti, which ranged from political to social, cultural, and religious identities. Many of the writings showed that the writers identified themselves as ENDF soldiers, who expressed the desire to maintain Ethiopian peace and security through the eradication of Tigrayans.

Some of the graffiti writers also explicitly indicated their identity. The picture below is among the graffiti images found written in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle. The graffiti (Figure 3.11) below reads:

ጅግናው የ24ኛ ቴዎድሮስ ክ/ ጦር መቀሌን በቁጥጥር ስር አዋላት።

The hero 24th Tewodros Regiment [of ENDF] captured Mekelle.



**Figure 3.11. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: 'The hero
24th Tewodros Regiment [of ENDF] captured Mekelle'
(Captured on 24 April 2024)**

Further, the graffiti writings and documents found in the museum showed that Tewodros 24th Regiment of the ENDF was among the armies that camped in the museum. Another graffiti provided specific details of some of the battalions within the 24th Regiment that camped in the museum. The graffiti below (Figure 3.12) reads:

ሻለቃ 2 ሻንበል 2 ጋንታ 4

Captain 2, Battalion 2 Unit 4



Figure 3.12. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: 'Captain 2, Battalion 2 Unit 4'
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This indicates that Captain 2, Battalion 2, Unit 4 is among the units that frequently identified themselves in the writings of the 24th Tewodros Regiment of the ENDF that camped in the museum.

A list of ENDF soldiers depicted below (Figure 3.13) was left behind by the soldiers who camped there. The list is written in Amharic. The list is one of the artefacts indicating who was camping in the Museum and who the authors of the graffiti most likely are. The understanding that the ENDF used the museum as barracks is corroborated by common knowledge in the community that ENDF forces camped in the museum.

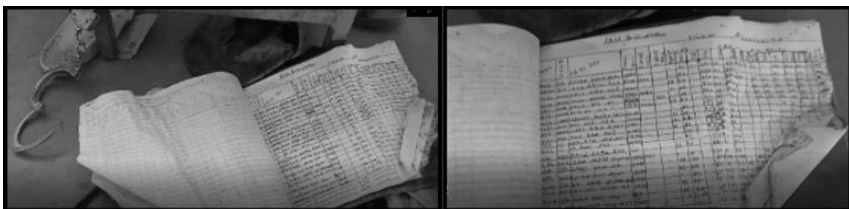


Figure 3.13. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: List of ENDF soldiers
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

A further indication of the source of the graffiti is a piece stating “Ethiopian Commando Special Force” on the wall of the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum (Figure 3.14):



Figure 3.14. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Ethiopia Commando Special Force’

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Associating the current war phenomena with historical identifications was also observed in the graffiti content. The following graffiti (Figure 3.15) reads:

አንድ ለናቱ ሺ ለጠላቱ መደሳው ካላ።

One for his mother [that fights like a] thousand against his enemies. Mevisaw Kassa.

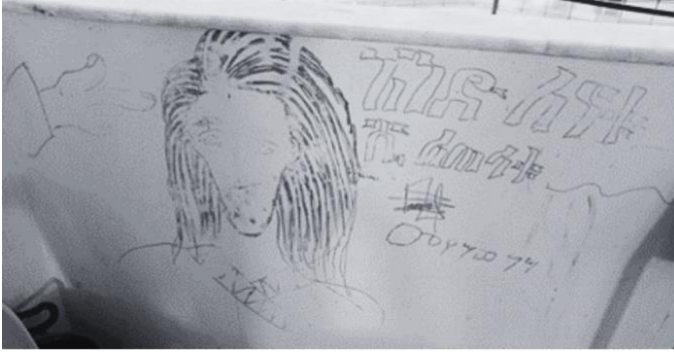


Figure 3.15. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: 'One for his mother [that fights like a] thousand against his enemies. Meysisaw Kassa

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The term Meysisaw Kassa refers to the name of Emperor Tewodros who ruled Ethiopia between 1855 and 1868. The battles under his reign aspired to achieve a unified Ethiopia. The author of the graffiti, who took part in the Tigray war, may have a positive sentimental appreciation of the emperor's historical aspirations of a unified Ethiopia – created by force – which inspired the author to paint a symbolic representation of Emperor Tewodros alongside the graffiti.

Another identifier of the actors of the war was graffiti written in the Oromo language. It reads:

Oromiyaan Biliisa Nibaati

Oromiyaan will be independent

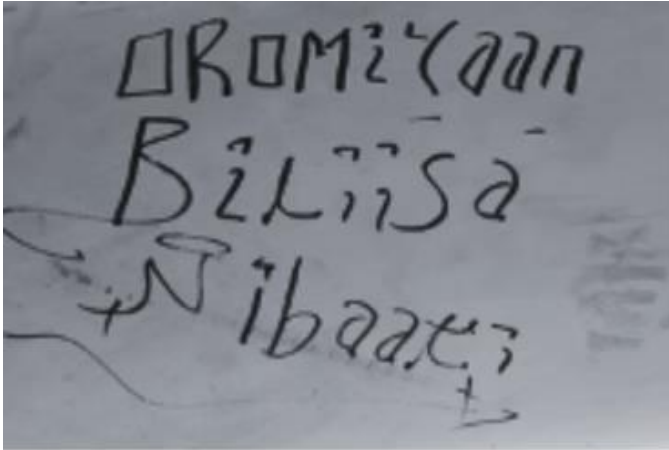


Figure 3.16. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Oromiyaan will be independent’
 (Captured on 24 April 2024)

Religious identifications are also significant among the graffiti images. Three religious denominations are reflected in the graffiti writings in Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Christian, Muslim, and Waqaa. These pieces of religious graffiti were written in Amharic, Arabic, and English languages respectively.

The graffiti (Figure 3.17) left to right reads:

ቅድስ ገብርኤል አንተው ጠብቀን ቅዱስ ጊዮርጊስ ይርዳችሁ የምህረት ቀን ይሁንልን።

St Gebriel, protect me. St George be with you. God make this day a day of mercy for us.

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ هَٰٓأَيُّهَا 100% رَحْمَتِي وَأَنْتَ رَحْمَتِي يَا رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ God All IS ONE

Allab is 100% my savior. Happy Ramadan. In the name of Allab. Oh, God all is one.

ምራን ዋቂ ዋው ሀበሻ ኢትዮጵያ

Pave our heading Waqaa now Habesha Ethiopia

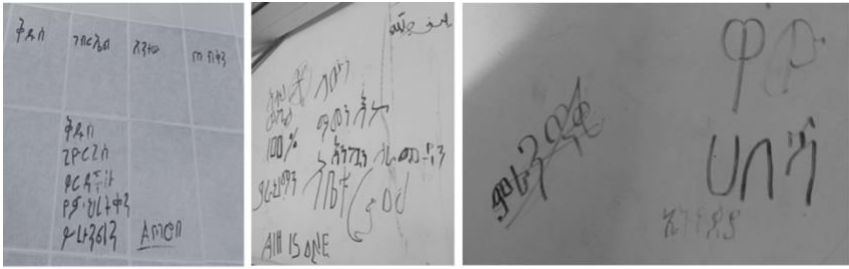


Figure 3.17. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: religious identifiers

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

In this context, Waaqa is the name of God in the Oromo cultural system. A graffiti excerpt (Figure 3.18) says:

ስማቸው ገ/እ/ሐር ስራቸው ጸረ እ/ሐር::

Their name is G/her [that means God’s servant] while their action is against God.

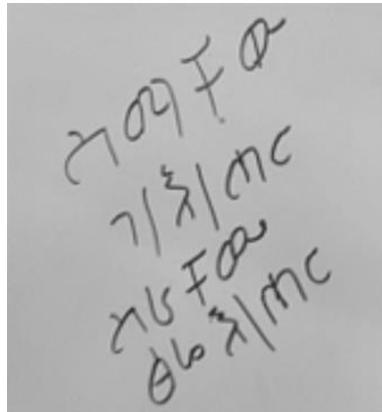


Figure 3.18. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Other pieces of graffiti also portrayed the daily food menus for the soldiers, their rooms, love stories, welcoming messages, and pledges for divine protection.

Relationships

Relationship describes how language, intertextuality, meanings and discourses are used to build and sustain or change and destroy social

relationships (Gee, 1999). A significant number of graffiti writings discussed relationships (122 times), positively (to build and sustain the social relations among Ethiopians) and negatively (to change and destroy the relationships that Ethiopians had with Tigrayans by framing Tigrayans as enemies). The graffiti portrays Tigrayans as ‘betrayers’ and ‘traitors’, depicting Tigrayans being against peace and unity in Ethiopia. The graffiti conveyed that the relationship between Ethiopians and Tigrayans needs to be destroyed, as Tigrayans had betrayed Ethiopia.

One piece of graffiti reads:

ጉራጌው ጀለሰ ጦርነቱ ላይ ሄዶ የሀወሃት ወታደሮች ሲሆኑበት እዚህ ነው ዳይፐር መሸጥ።

Guraghe [an ethnic name that settled in Southern Ethiopia that is associated with high trade and market orientation] man who went to war observes the situation of the TPLF soldiers, then he said “I should have a good diaper market in here.

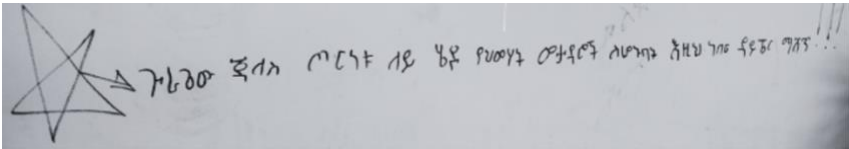


Figure 3.19. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: belittling Tigrayan people

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The Tigrayans are belittled and portrayed as babies (who need diapers). The graffiti use irony as a hidden transcript; Tigrayans are weak and are unable to defend themselves on the battlefield. The graffiti identified Tigrayans as cowards and frustrated.

Another piece of graffiti reads:

ቀንጅብ ጡት ነክሾች ጅንታ

Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bite [their mother’s] breast.

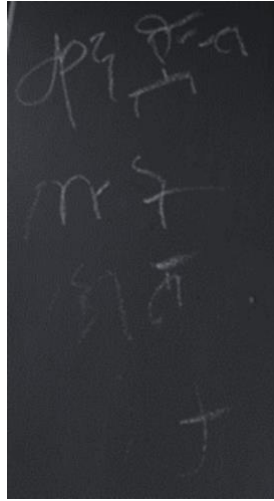


Figure 3.20. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bites [their mother's] breast
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti represented Ethiopia as a mother that tirelessly worked to see her kids growing while breastfeeding them while the kids (Tigrayans) bite the breast that feeds them. Motherhood is associated with care, love and compassion. The Tigrayans are portrayed as betraying the motherly love, which, in the context of the culture, is a big insult. The term 'junta renegades' emphasise the immoral nature of Tigrayans.

Ethiopia is represented as 'motherhood' through 'breasts' in the graffiti while Tigrayans are represented as 'kids' and as 'daytime hyenas'. As daytime hyenas are dangerous and kids who bite their mother are immoral, fighting these is the responsibility of the Ethiopians to protect their mother, Ethiopia. The graffiti can also be understood to represent the relationship between Ethiopia and Tigray as the former sovereign nation being betrayed by the latter.

Another piece of graffiti states:

ወያኔ=ማለት ጅብ ህዋሀት=ማለት ውሻ እና ከሀዲ ነው።

Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors

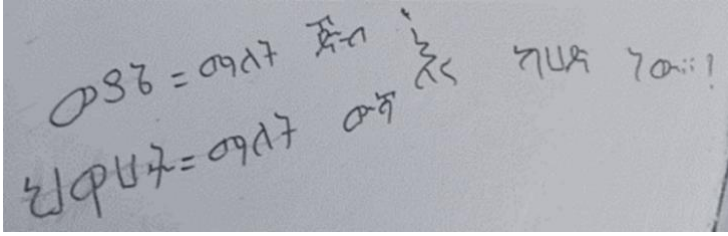


Figure 3.21. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The content of the graffiti represents Tigrayans as immoral traitors. Sexually explicit expressions were also present in the graffiti. The graffiti below (Figure 3.22) reads:

እናት ትቦዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ።

*Mother fu** the bitch of dog daylight hyena.*

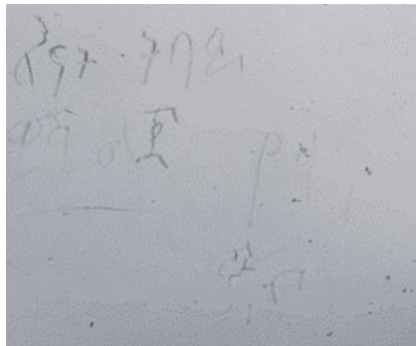


Figure 3.22. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: sexually explicit degrading texts

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The sexually explicit texts further demean ‘Woyane’, ‘junta’, and other slurs. Some of the graffiti effeminises Tigrayans to demean them, using sexually explicit expressions.

Politics

According to Gee (1999), politics reflects how discourses are used to create, distribute or withhold narratives that serve as a good or

acceptable standard across communities. Political discourse was found 88 times in the graffiti.

Some of the graffiti images compared Tigrayans with non-human living things. The graffiti represented Tigrayans as ‘hyenas’, ‘wolves’, ‘rats’, ‘dogs’, and ‘donkeys’ while those that have human representation of Tigrayans framed them as ‘thieves’, ‘traitors’ and dangerous, untrustworthy. The graffiti below (Figure 3.23) reads:

ወያኔ የቀን ጅብ ነው

Woyane is a daytime hyena.

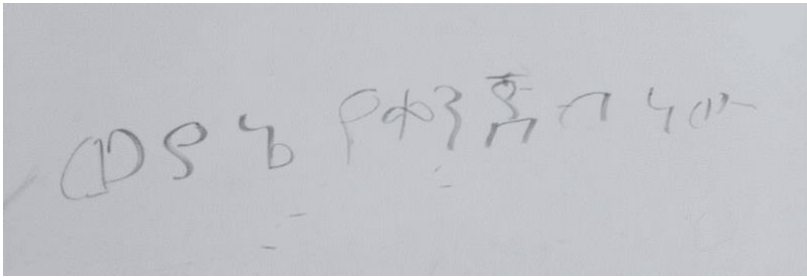


Figure 3.23. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum. Woyane is day-time hyena

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The theme of the Woyane portrayed as a ‘hyena’ connects two terms. Woyane points to the Tigrayan people and has a derogatory or negative connotation in certain contexts, but it is also used by Tigrayan people themselves (as in the Woyane Combat Unit of the TPLF), referring to the pride of the Tigray people and their fight against oppression by colonial powers and expansionists.

The term hyena in the Ethiopian idiomatic expression is used to portray someone as ‘greedy’, ‘thorny’, ‘self-centred’, ‘egoistic’ and ‘stingy’ in character, with a negative orientation to manipulating good values and undermining good morals for personal gain at the cost of society. This relates to hyenas having a night calendar; human beings protect themselves through thorned fences around their house. Anything left in the dark is destined to be eaten by the hyenas. The term daytime hyena then portrays someone who shamelessly shows inhuman and callous behaviour during the day as opposed to the real

nature of the hyena, which roams at night. Thus, someone who is being coined as a ‘daytime hyena’ means a callous and greedy person reflecting inhuman behaviour. This requires people to collectively take all necessary measures to eliminate the daytime hyena in order to maintain acceptable human behaviour and norms. The term ‘daytime hyena’ was introduced by Prime Minister Abiy on 23 June 2018 in a speech broadcast by EBC, but removed in a later edition as well as in later broadcasts (EBC, 2018; Yethiopia News, 2018; Dawro Tube, 2020). The graffiti in Figure 3.24 shows that the use of slurs in the language of the political leader of the country reverberated in the perception of the soldiers sent to Tigray.

How political developments are reflected in the graffiti is shown in the following example. In the last week of November 2020, a list of TPLF leaders was circulated in the mainstream media, with the objective that these leaders should be arrested. The graffiti reflects this in a drawing of the President of the regional state of Tigray with the text:

ተፈላጊው ደብረጽዮን

The wanted Debrezion.



Figure 3.24. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The soldier's graffiti shows the influence of the communications by the federal government.

Some graffiti expresses strong political nationalistic sentiments. An illustration is the following graffiti (Figure 3.25), which reads:

ኢትዮጵያ ህወሓት ጁንታው ከራስ በፊት ለህዝብና ለሃገርሃገረ ኢትዮጵያ ከራ ይገባላል የግድብና ጅግና ልጅ ወልደሻል ሰላም ለሀገሪ ምን ጊዜ

Ethiopia: Prioritize your country's interests before yours. TPLF Junta. Ethiopia be proud, you deserve it, you have a hero son who never let you fall down for others. Peace always for my nation.

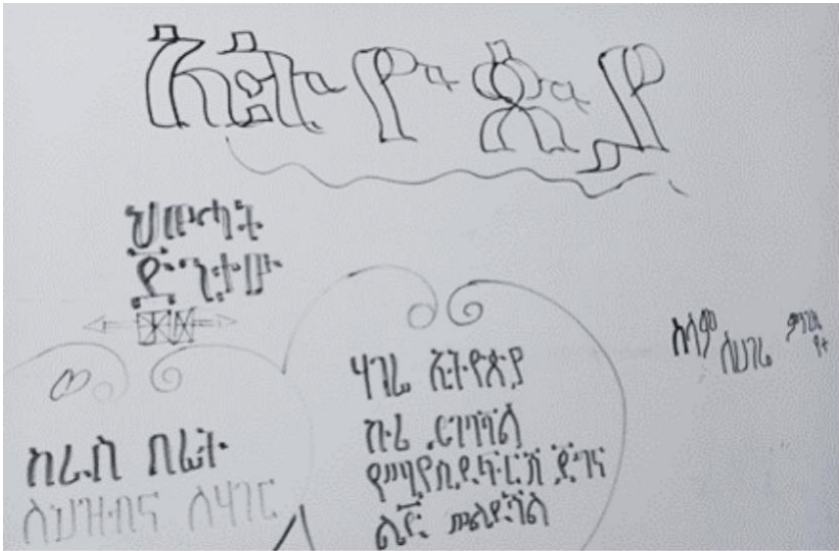


Figure 3.25. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: nationalistic themes

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The graffiti represents Tigrayans as against peace in Ethiopia. The graffiti signals that the Tigrayans are an outside group, a group that is a threat to Ethiopia's peace. Tigrayans are framed as a threat to Ethiopian national interest. Another political graffiti text (Figure 3.26) reads:

ህወሓት ሁህይወት ወወንበዴ ሓሓፍራሽ ትትጥፋ::

TPLF H-Life, W-Gang, H-Created to destroy, T-It needs to be destroyed.

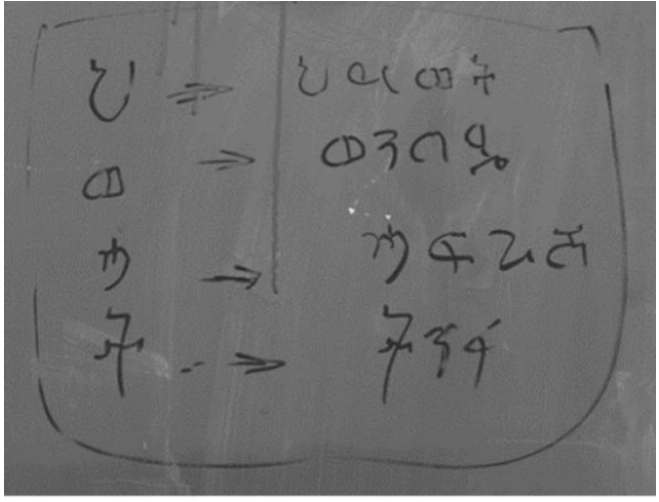


Figure 3.26. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: political agenda

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This shows that the author of this graffiti sees the TPLF as an enemy that must be destroyed for the attainment of Ethiopian peace and stability.

Connections

Connections refer to the meanings, language and discourses that describe the connection among each other or disconnection from each other (Gee, 1999). The 94 attributions to connection/disconnection show that Tigrayans are not only disconnected from Ethiopia, but also considered a national threat to Ethiopia.

One piece of graffiti (Figure 3.27) reads:

ጁንታው ሰው በላ ፓንዳ ግዕዳተ ሞት ሞት ተቀባረ። አንድ ሰው ለመኖር ስለው አንጂ እነዚህን ከህዲ።

The cannibal betrayer Junta is dead under the earth. It was to make one person live these all betrayal.

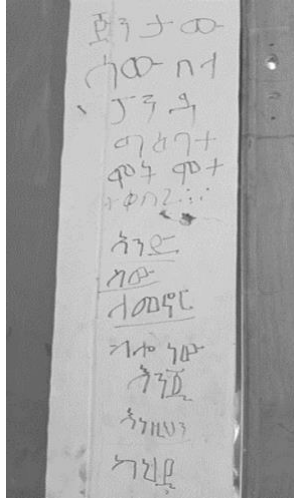


Figure 3.27. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The graffiti represents Tigrayans as cannibals. Tigrayans are framed as not only not human, but also anti-human, such that everyone needs to prevent themselves from being eaten by them.

Similarly, the graffiti below (Figure 3.28) shows that the authors categorised Tigrayans as non-human. It reads:

ወያኔ የሰው ዘር አይደለም

Woyane is not a human race.



Figure 3.28. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024, inscription is very vague)

These expressions appeal for the mobilisation of people against Tigrayans, because such representations present Tigrayans as anti-human and, thus, anti-moral. Anyone who wants to protect their own moral values needs to fight against them.

Another piece of graffiti (Figure 3.29) reads:

all everything changes one day. በአይጥ የተሰራ ቤት በድምት ጩኸት ይፈርሳል።

Everything changes [in] one day. A house built by a mouse will be destroyed by the scream of a cat.

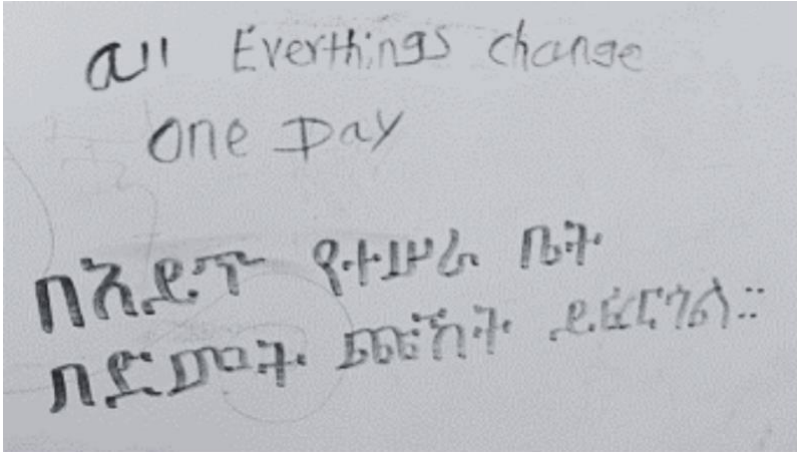


Figure 3.29. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The text belittles Tigrayans and what they may have achieved (mice, associated with small things) and depicts them as powerless in front of the mighty greatness of Ethiopia (cat). From a connotated intertextuality perspective, this means that Tigrayans are powerless and unable to stand in front of Ethiopians. Other pieces of graffiti frames Tigrayans as cowards who are frustrated by the heroism of Ethiopians. This excerpt (Figure 3.30) reads:

ወያኔ ሸንፊታም ፈሪ ቦቅባቃ ዘረኛ፡ . . አንረሳም አንለቅሀም ከሀዲ።

Woyane coward, frustrated and racist. We will never forget, not let you live either. Traitor.

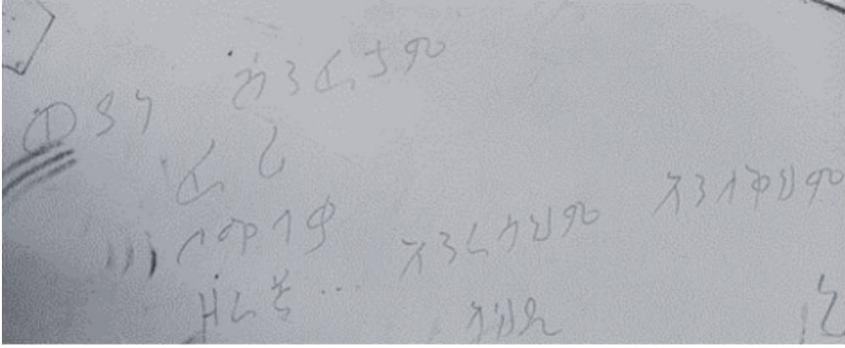


Figure 3.30. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This text portrays a great level of disconnectedness to the extent that Tigrayans should die.

One of the pieces of graffiti described Ethiopia's disunion from Tigray as a blessing (Figure 3.31); it reads:

መለያየት ሞት ነው። ከእናንተ መለያየት ለኛ ዕድል ነው። ለናንተ ግን ሞት ነው።

Disunion is bitter like a death. But for us, disunion from you is a blessing while it is death for you.

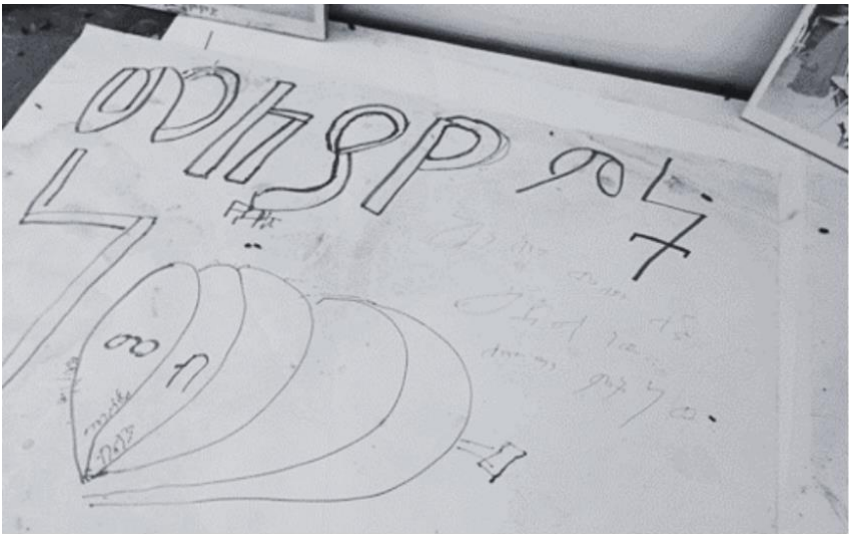


Figure 3.31. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This shows the serious disconnect of Tigrayans from Ethiopians. Another piece of graffiti (Figure 3.32) reads:

እኔስ ኑሬያለሁ ሲደገኝ ሲከፋኝ ከእንግዲህ ተወልዶ ሰው ለሚሆን ይብላኝ።

I have lived enough whether comforted or not, my worry is for the newborns.

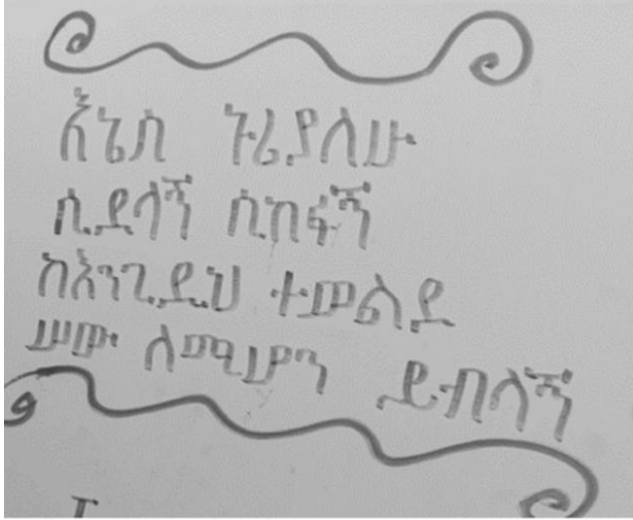


Figure 3.32. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Disconnection is also portrayed in this text, which could be interpreted in different ways, but seems to portray a concern for the future.

Sign systems and ways of knowledge

Sign systems and knowledge in discourse analysis explore how the representations of a specific group are reinforced to serve as symbolic representations of that group within a particular context. This demonstrates how discourses are transformed into symbols and knowledge that represent the discourse subject (Gee, 1999).

In the religious and cultural context of Ethiopia, labelling someone as anti-religion brings moral shame to the person. The below graffiti excerpt (Figure 3.33) reads:

የወያኔ መጨረሻ 1 ሞት 2 ከምድረ ገጽ መጥፋት 3 ውሻ 4 ሌባ 5 ቡዳ I love Ethiopia.

*The end of Woyane 1. Death 2. Being Destroyed from the Earth 3. Dog 4. Thief
5. Buda. I love Ethiopia.*



Figure 3.33. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti is a manifesto and a programme for the love of Ethiopia, as well as identifying the reasons for this. Tigrayans are 'dogs' and 'thieves'. It refers to 'buda', a cultural reference to people who are possessed, who have the power of the evil eye, and who can transform into a hyena. This separates the belief system seen as rooted in the well-developed Aksumite empire from that of the society of 'poor', 'simple' people, who are to be hunted and even killed.

This may be a reason for poor, simple people to be socially isolated from others, as they may be possessed and bring evil. In some pieces of graffiti, the author indicated that Tigrayans usually coin their names according to Christian values, but that this is contradicted by them dying, remaining unprotected by God. This claim dissociates Tigrayans from getting sympathy from other Ethiopians with the same religious fellowship, because Tigrayans are labelled as 'anti-religion'. This reveals the necropolitical nature of the graffiti texts, which describe how power is exerted over life and death, highlighting how the Tigray population is rendered expendable or subjected to

death, despite their religious devotion. They have been abandoned by society. They have been abandoned by God. Such utterances have huge impacts, because these pieces of graffiti do not leave room for the believer to think of a shared connection with Tigrayans who are of the same religion.

Among the graffiti writings, sign systems and ways of knowledge are attributed 90 times. In the writings, terms like ‘Ethiopian unity’, ‘nationalism’, ‘heroism’, and maintaining ‘national sovereignty’ are associated with the ENDF and Ethiopians. While ‘betrayal’, ‘theft’, ‘looting’, ‘fart’, ‘cowardice’, ‘renegades’ and ‘cannibalism’ are associated with Tigrayans.

The design of the law enforcement operation was to celebrate the ‘Game over, Woyane’ slogan, which can be traced back to Eritrean President Isayas’ speech in January 2018.

The graffiti writings below (Figure 3.34) read:

ፍይ ወያነ ነስ ደሳይ

Woyane is dead

ፍይ ወያነ ገሜ ወሮ

Woyane Game Over

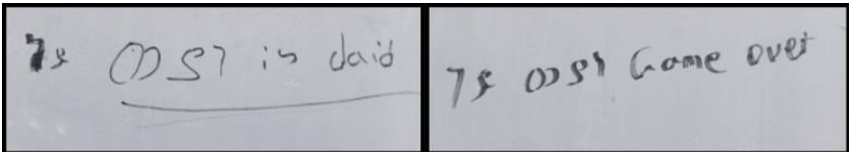


Figure 3.34. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Woyane is dead. Woyane Game Over

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The ‘Game Over’ utterances are among the most common writings, indicating that these terms were common knowledge among the soldiers. Many of the graffiti content attributes the eradication of Tigrayans as a solution, for the sake of maintaining Ethiopian unity. The texts refer to the eradication of Tigrayans as a permanent solution to the problems diagnosed as caused by inherit Tigrayan attributes.

Discussion

In the exhibition in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum there are photographs showing the presence of members of the ELF and EPLF leaders at the first organisational congress of the TPLF in 1979, referring to the collaboration between the sides, as described by Berhe (2008). Strategic and ideological differences between the two combatants' factions hampered the culturally and socio-economically intertwining of the respective communities (Young, 1996). Shortly after the victory of the TPLF/EPRDF¹ led Ethiopia and newly recognised EPLF-led Eritrea, the differences between the two parties escalated into the Badme War.

The term 'Woyane', which refers to Tigrayans in these significant historic events, plays an important role in all the graffiti. In the graffiti, the term 'Woyane' is not positive but hostile (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024, Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). The term 'Woyane' is referred to frequently in the graffiti left on the walls and artefacts in the museum, which was extensively damaged in the war (Awet, 2021).

The term 'Woyane' would become an overtly political negative term in Ethiopia in October 2016, after a political activist grabbed a microphone at a podium, during a concert drawing a large crowd in Addis Ababa. The event was a religious Irreecha celebration of Oromo Thanksgiving. The person who took the microphone chanted "Down, down Woyane" (Alemayehu, 2017; Forsenn, 2018; Debele, 2019), in reference to the TPLF and in opposition to the leading political party, the EPRDF, which was led by the TPLF. The slogan would stick and would translate into many songs and expressions. This underscores what Tronvoll (2020) observed as "conflating the TPLF and Tigrayan population", which "has been a common, although flawed, assumption exhibited by many Ethiopians throughout the rule of TPLF/EPRDF". As a result, Tigrayans are "collectively blamed and persecuted for the wrongdoings of TPLF, although they had equally suffered under its suppressive politics"

¹ The Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assembled the different political groups in Ethiopia including the TPLF and was for most of the time led by the TPLF leader and later Prime Minister of Ethiopia Zenawi Meles.

(Tronvoll, 2020). The term ‘Woyane’ can be understood as a term in the Ethiopian context that was, and still is, being used to represent all ethnic Tigrayans. The graffiti portrays a stark sentiment of ‘otherness’, identifying Tigrayans in derogatory terms. The sentiments expressed in the graffiti provide a justification for the ‘eradication’ of Tigrayans, as a solution to Ethiopia’s problems.

This graffiti at the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum demonstrates how slogans used by the leaders of the federal government of Ethiopia and Eritrea guided the actions in the war. President Isayas uttered ‘Game over, Woyane’ as early as January 2018 and it reverberated up to when the Eritreans left Tigray in 2023. The ‘daytime hyena’ slur referring to Tigrayans, introduced by Prime Minister Abiy in June 2018, is reflected in the graffiti left by soldiers in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum. These slogans were indexing the targeting of people in Tigray, which is not just a result of the war, but was part of the propaganda leading up to it and that motivated the soldiers taking part in the war (Gebresslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Geb & Tesfa, 2024).

Conclusion

The Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle was a symbol of pride among the people of Tigray, celebrating the victory of the TPLF against the Derg regime. During the Tigray war in 2020–2022, much of the museum was destroyed and it was used as a military camp by ENDF soldiers from the last week of November 2020 to the third week of June 2021. Graffiti, document evidence, and survivors’ accounts confirmed that the 24th Tewodros Regiment of ENDF and Ethiopian Commando Special Force were in the museum. The museum also served as a detention centre for people who were arrested during the war. There is evidence that it was used for torture and there are allegations that some people who were detained there disappeared.

The soldiers left graffiti on the walls and artefacts in the museum. In some of them, they identified themselves. Guided by the theory of Scott’s hidden transcript and Gee’s building blocks of discourse analysis, this chapter explored the texts in this graffiti. During

observations in the museum 154 graffiti were discovered and photographed. The content of the 142 graffiti was analysed: 121 of the graffiti were written in Amharic, 11 in English, 6 Oromo, 3 Tigrinya and 1 in Arabic languages.

The graffiti described Tigrayans as ‘cannibals’, ‘daytime hyenas’, ‘mice’, ‘dogs’, ‘rats’, ‘traitors’ and ‘non-humans’, indexing them as ‘anti-Ethiopian’ and needing to be ‘eradicated’ and ‘killed’ to maintain Ethiopian ‘sovereignty’, ‘peace’, ‘unity’ and the ‘moral system’. The graffiti writing also framed Tigrayans collectively using the negative term ‘Woyane’, in phrases such as ‘Woyane is dead’, ‘the end of Woyane’, ‘the junta has fallen’, ‘Woyane is non-existent’, ‘Woyane is being killed’, and ‘Woyane has paid for what she did’. The political slogan ‘Woyane, game over’ is also repeated in the graffiti found in the museum. ‘Woyane’ is interpreted as referring to Tigrayans in general, not just the TPLF.

The graffiti shows the collective blaming of Tigrayans (‘Woyane’) for the ills of the TPLF/EPRDF and contains political messages in which the TPLF and Tigrayans (collectively referred to as ‘Woyane’) are blamed for the situation in the country. It is significant for the investigation of genocidal intent that explicit references to the ‘eradication’ of Tigrayans were also found in the graffiti in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum.

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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. His research is part of his PhD on communication during a communication blockade in war-time, as member of the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC). 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. She provided the photographs of the museum from before the war as part of a systematic collection of pre-war observations.

Ethical considerations

We received clearance for this chapter of the curator of the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum, who provided approval for the use of the photographs. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled "Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting".

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

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