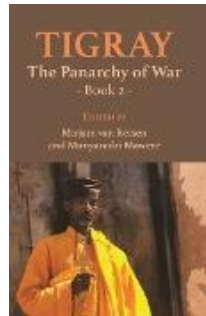


# Negative Stereotyping, Creation of a Threat, and Incitement to Genocide: Discourse Analysis of Hate-speech Disseminated in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen*

**Chapter in:**  
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# Negative Stereotyping, Creation of a Threat, and Incitement to Genocide: Discourse Analysis of Hate-speech Disseminated in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen*

ሓሰት እንተተደጋገመ ሓቂ ይመስላል።

*When falsehoods are repeated, they look alike the truth.*

### Abstract

This research compared the content of speeches made by the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea with text left by foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war to investigate negative stereotyping, the creation of a threat, and incitement to genocide. A corpus of graffiti, left in places used as barracks by Ethiopian soldiers deployed in Tigray, was studied. Themes in the graffiti were compared with themes in utterances by political, religious, and economic leaders of the country as well as celebrities and artists. The analysis shows that the soldiers used similar themes to those used by leaders and celebrities disseminated in public media, portraying Tigrayans as a threat to the country. Most concerning, some of these utterances talked of the extermination of the Tigrayan people as a ‘solution’ to the situation of the country. This ethnographic study found that the negative stereotyping and framing of the Tigrayan people as a ‘threat’ resulted in language directly inciting the extermination of the people of Tigray. Reflecting on the performative aspect of speech, further investigation of genocidal intent is recommended.

**Keywords:** Tigray war, graffiti, hate-speech, incitement, genocide, Eritrea, Ethiopia

## Introduction

Research on the historical development of hate speech, dehumanisation, and incitement to genocide indicates that hate speech campaigns are signs that there is a high potential for the perpetration of crimes against the targeted out-group (Benesch, 2014). There is historical and contemporary evidence that war, psychological warfare, propaganda, and hate speech are interconnected and result in mass killings (Oberschall, 2012; Benesch, 2014).

*War is considered a violent means of attaining a specific objective, but there has always been a continuous flow of carefully directed propaganda messages.* (Jowett and Donnell, 2012)

Military wars are coordinated with a deliberately designed propaganda campaign that targets the ‘enemy’. Lasswell stated:

*The basic idea is that the best success in war is achieved by the destruction of the enemy’s will to resist, and with a minimum annihilation of fighting capacity.* (Lasswell, p. 261)

Propaganda serves as the central element of psychological warfare, allowing actors to employ strategic messaging against adversaries. This effort is often supported by additional military, economic, or political measures, as needed, to reinforce the propaganda (Linebarger, 1954).

Propaganda was used in World War I and World War II, with Telegraph, radio broadcasts, and printed messages serving as instruments of dissemination, resulting in mass propaganda by one group against the other (Linebarger, 1954; Jowett & Donnell, 2012; Lasswell, 1951). After 1945, the ideological struggle between the East and West dominated the propaganda, while the Cold War brought a unique nature and complexity to the propaganda, as a mixture of political, religious and economic interests (Jowett & Donnell, 2012).

Studying its nature, scholars understand that hate propaganda commences long before the physical war is declared and continues long after peace treaties are signed (Jowett & Donnell, 2012; Benesch,

2014). Hate speech is harmful speech directed towards people based on perceived in-group or out-group identity categorisations:

*Hate speech refers to speech that denigrates a person or people based on their membership in a group, usually an immutable group defined by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, for example, sometimes also religion or political affiliation or views.* (Benesch, 2014, p. 5)

Scholars have identified that inflammatory hate speech and mass propaganda are indicators of violence to follow and are critical warning signs of mass violence (Benesch, 2014). Unless the early warning indicators are mitigated, hate propaganda can catalyse mass killings, including genocide (Benesch, 2014; Oberschall, 2012). By teaching people to view other human beings as less than human, and as mortal threats, thought leaders can make atrocities seem acceptable – and even necessary, as a form of collective self-defence. Such hate propaganda preceded the atrocities of the Holocaust (Brustein & King, 2004), Rwanda genocide (Hefti & Jonas, 2020), Myanmar (Morada, 2023), Darfur (Van Schaack, 2004), and the war in Bosnia (Kurspahic, 2010) and continues to risk human rights and peace in many countries today.

The Tigray war broke out in the first week of November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023). The parties fighting in the war, which continued until November 2022, were the coalition of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), Amhara Fano, special forces from Ethiopian regions, and Tigray Special Force, which regrouped itself into the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). The war was characterised by mass propaganda against Tigrayans in the months and years that preceded the start of the war (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Geb & Tesfa, 2024). The estimation of the University of Ghent is that anywhere between 500,000 and 700,000 people died in the war (Pilling & Schipani, 2023). The research question asked by this chapter is: *How, and in which ways, are the narratives of propaganda campaigns disseminating hate-speech towards Tigrayans, before and during the Tigray war, reflected in the graffiti written by soldiers based in Tigray during the war?*

## Theoretical framework

### *Speech act theory*

Developed by Austin (1962), the speech act theory explores how an utterance can change the information state of the hearer (Salt, 2004). This theory discusses language not only as a tool of message exchange, but also as a vital instrument of action-reaction relations of the interactants. The speech act theory is classified under the ordinary-language philosophy, as it aims to accommodate a wide variety of linguistic functions and as its truth conditions are subsumed under the more general conditions of success of speech acts (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Language serves as a link between the utterances of language users and their actions, including their intentions, which is a crucial consideration in the successful performance of speech acts (Mabaquiao, 2018). The language-world relation is determined by the language-user relation (Austin, 1989). Austin categorised utterances into constative utterances and performative utterances. Constative utterances are linguistic expressions that are either true or false, that are used to explain facts or the state of the metaphysics (Austin, 1962; Mabaquiao, 2018). Performative utterance refers to linguistic expressions that are used to perform certain actions (Austin, 1962; Mabaquiao, 2018). Austin (1989) classified performatives into five categories:

- A commitment by the speaker to take a specific action
- An exposition expounding views, conducting arguments, and clarifying usages and references
- Advocating the exercise of an action
- Behaving, and judging people's behaviours, fortunes, and attitudes towards other people's behaviour
- Reasoning based on evidence or logic concerning value or fact, to the extent that these can be distinguished (Austin, 1989)

Austin (1989) makes us aware that the content of the narratives is performative at different levels and, when repeated and reasoned, also has consequences for actual behaviour.

### ***Hate propaganda and incitement to genocide and atrocities***

Propaganda is the use of images, slogans, symbols, and falsehoods that resonate with prejudices and emotions for persuasion disseminated to mass audiences (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). Propaganda is “an endeavor to spread ideas without regard to truth and accuracy” (Toennies, 1922 as cited in Oberschall, 2012).

Political speech, deliberative discourse in democracies, aims to influence people and create consensus and majority support around the speaker’s position. Political communication during the war is characterised by an appeal to emotion by spreading hate against the out-group, by framing them as the enemy using various techniques including inflammatory speeches, dehumanisation, manipulation, and disinformation, as well as incitement to the extermination of the out-group victims under the pretext of self-defence (Oberschall, 2012; Benesch, 2014; Hefti & Jonas, 2020; Kurspahic, 2010).

In examining the measurement mechanisms for incitement to genocide, Benesch (2014) designed five factors to examine the danger level of inflammatory speech, which include some or all of the following factors.



**Figure 4.1. Most dangerous speech**  
(Adopted by author from Benesch, 2014, p. 8.)



According to Van Dijk, the level of audiences' susceptibility to dangerous speech and incitement to genocide depends on when:

*(1) [the audiences] have incomplete or lack of relevant knowledge; (2) foundational norms, values, and ideologies that cannot be denied or ignored; (3) strong emotions, traumas, etc. that make people vulnerable; and (4) social positions, professions, status, etc. that induce people into tending to accept the discourses, arguments, etc. of elite persons, groups or organizations.* (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 375)

Waller (2002) also identified three components of hate speech, hate discourse, and hate ideology in inter-group relations.

- **Stereotyping:** The target group is negatively stereotyped as different, alien, inferior, and inhuman, not meriting protection or rights to life, liberty and property accorded to human beings.
- **Defining as a threat:** The target group is characterised as an extreme threat to the survival and well-being of one's ethnic group, nationality or nation.
- **Incitement towards elimination:** Advocacy for an eliminationist solution to the threat, which ranges from (quotas) and discrimination (legal segregation) imposed on the target, to expulsion (ethnic cleansing) and, in extreme hate discourse, killing and annihilation (Waller, 2002).

Following these three components of hate propaganda identified by Waller (2002), this chapter examines how narratives disseminated from the top of the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea were present in the graffiti of the foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war.

## **Methodology**

Guided by the speech act theory and dangerous speech indicators, the research examined the mainstream hate speech, disinformation, and incitement, as compared to the graffiti written in public spaces and atrocities committed during the Tigray war. The research employed a qualitative discourse analysis.

**Table 4.1. Method of data collection and analysis**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Approach</b>
1	Method	Qualitative discourse analysis
2	Study subject	Mainstreamed speech about Tigrayans, graffiti images written by soldiers and atrocities committed
3	Data collection tool	Capturing photos, observations, reports and interview
4	Sites of data collection	Media content for the speeches Public spaces for the graffiti content: (i) Museum (ii) School (iii) Health facility (iv) Road
5	Specific sites	Martyrs' Memorial Museum (24 April 2024) 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	255 graffiti writings and media data 74 Emperor Yohannes School 142 Martyrs' Memorial Museum 2 Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital 37 Media data
7	Selection criteria	Waller's (2002) three components of hate speech, hate discourse, and hate ideology in inter-group relations and Benesch's (2014)

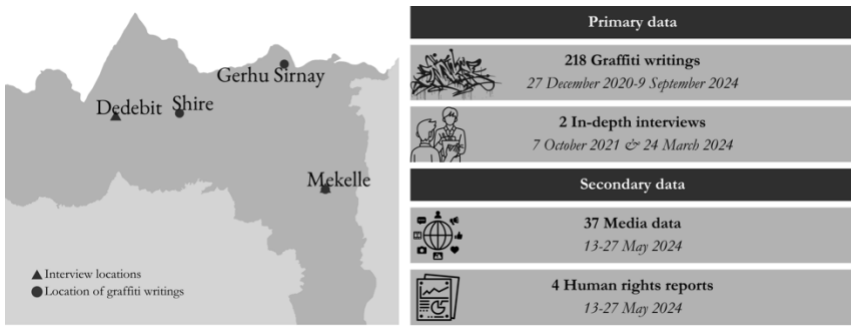
No.	Criteria	Approach
		five factors to examine the dangerousness of inflammatory speeches.
8	Number of included data	37 media data 22 graffiti
9	In-depth interviews	SHIDI01, 7 October 2021 MGIDI02, 24 March 2022
10	Coding procedures	The images of the graffiti were first converted into an object archived in a dedicated server and coded in an Excel spreadsheet. The words were then transcribed and translated. The translations were conducted by the first author who captured the photos. Two colleagues crosschecked the translations, as compared to the images
11	Analysis procedures	Major themes that were grasped from the data were identified. Detailed findings of the sites were published in two other chapters: Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a); Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b).

The pieces of graffiti in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum were captured by one of the authors on 24 April 2024, whereas the photographs of the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School were captured by a member of the school community. These were collected and crosschecked on location. After verification, the messages were transcribed, translated, and analysed according to the research criteria indicated in the theoretical framework. In the text cited in the findings, sexually connotated, rude expressions have been indicated with \*\*\*.

The footage was also compared with footage collected by the Tigray Education Bureau, from where consent for their use was obtained regarding the use of photographs from the Emperor Yohannes

School, and the archive of the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum, from where consent was received for use of the photographs taken of the museum.

The photographs in Gerhu Sirnay were taken 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 of the photographs published in various social media in 2023.



**Figure 4.2. Overview of data collected and used in the study**

### Study sites

The contents of the graffiti were collected from a school, museum, and health facility in different parts of Tigray. After the outbreak of the war, the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School that was named after Emperor Yohannes IV. The school is in Mekelle and was used as barracks by soldiers during the war. It was occupied from the end of 2020 till mid-April 2021. The graffiti was found written on the boards, chairs, and walls of the destroyed school.

The other study area was the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle. The museum was a centre of documentation and contained an exhibition on the 17 years of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) struggle and its partnership with the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (now the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice [PFDJJ]) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Following the outbreak of the Tigray war, Ethiopian soldiers ransacked and destroyed the museum. It was

also used as a camp for the soldiers. Survivors of arrests and torture also indicated that the soldiers had used the museum as a detention centre where detained people were handcuffed and tortured.

The third study location is Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital in Egela District in the Central Zone of Tigray. Gerhu Sirnay is a small-town in the centre of the Egela, a district that borders Tserona in Eritrea. The Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital is the only hospital in the district and serves a population of more than 50,000. The hospital was looted and destroyed by Eritrean soldiers who used it as a military camp. The Eritrean soldiers left graffiti in the hospital, which is the main subject of this research.

## **Results and findings**

### ***Negative stereotyping***

Three months after he was nominated as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy used the term ‘daytime hyena’ referring to Tigrayans. The term was used following an attack at a public gathering in Meskel Square on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018). It was alleged that the attack was carried out by Tigrayans. The Prime Minister said that the perpetrators had escaped to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, and were anti-reformists (Yethiopia News, 2018). In Ethiopia the term daytime hyena is used to portray a person as not being human, someone who shamelessly moves around in search for food during the day, in comparison to the natural rhythm of the hyena who is active at night. It is a derogatory term.

# 'Daytime hyena'



**Figure 4.3. Analysis of hate speech actors on 'daytime hyena'**

(Following Benesch, 2014)

When a speaker is a public figure who is part of the top leadership of the country, Dijk (2006) refers to authority as an instrument that encourages people to translate the speeches of the figure into action. ETV (formerly the Ethiopian Broadcasting Network [EBF]), Fana Television, and Walta Television are among the state-owned and ruling party-affiliated media organisations that serve as a main source of information for a significant portion of the Ethiopian public.

A prominent figure, artist, and film actor, Debebe Eshetu, reiterated Abiy's 'daytime hyena' utterance broadcast on the popular film media channel Sodere TV, saying:

*He [Prime Minister Abiy] said hyenas, he is right. What I want to advise Dr Abiy is that there is a tale; eat the hyena and get blessed before you are eaten by them. Let's eat them and get blessed. We will become sacred.* (Debebe Eshetu, 27 June 2018, Sodere TV, 0:00:46–0:01:01, translation by authors)

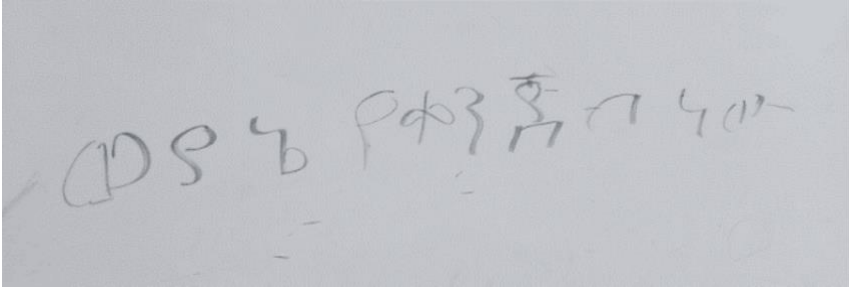
The portrayal of Tigrayans as 'daytime hyenas' is also among the commonly used graffiti writings found in Emperor Yohannes School and the Martyrs' Memorial Museum.

The graffiti depicted below was found in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle where ENDF soldiers and Special Commando set up their camp. It reads:

ወያኔ የቀን ጅብ ነው

This can be translated as:

*Woyane is a daytime hyena.*



**Figure 4.4. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum. Daytime hyena**

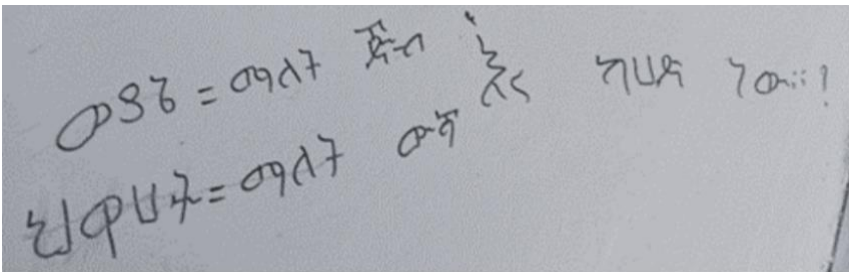
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Another excerpt (Figure 5) states:

ወያኔ=ማለት ጅብ ህዋሀት=ማለት ውሻ እና ከሀዲ ነው።

*Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors.*

This graffiti presents Tigrayans as immoral traitors who antagonise Ethiopian nationals.



**Figure 4.5. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Traitors**

(captured on 24 April 2024)

On 28 November 2020, artist Debebe Eshetu stated:

November is about to end. They are getting warmth from the fire they are setting. As it is tempered, it is about to blow a fuse. I don't feel any sympathy for their burning up. I say they deserve it. (Amharic Tube, 2020, translation by authors)

The graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

ሰው በሎች ናቸው ወይን ማለት የአገሪቱን ንብረት ሲበዙበዝ የኖረ ሌባ አጃጂው ቡድን አገሩን የሚከዳ ሌባ ቡድን ነው ወይን ማለት የመከላከያን ገንዘብና ንብረት ሲሰርቅ የኖረ በመዋጮ ሆነ በሌላ አመክኞቹ ሲዘርፍ የኖረ ጁንታ ቡድን ነው አሁን ግን አቢቃለት ዘረፋም ሆነ ሌላ ነገር የለም ግፍ ሰርቶ ሞተ ቁጡን ተ\*ዳ በመላጣ!!!!

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

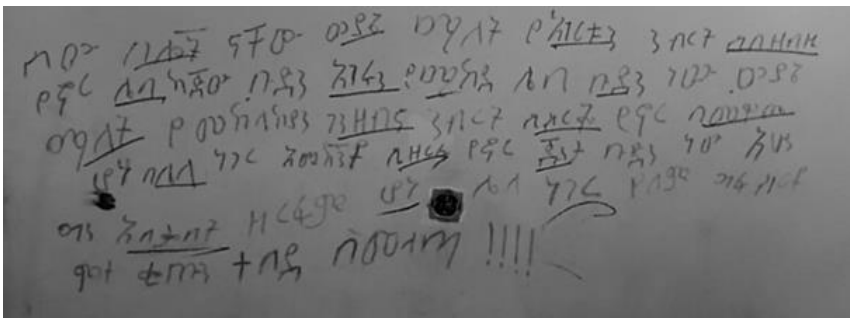


Figure 4.6. Tigrayans from Emperor Yohannes School: Cannibals  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

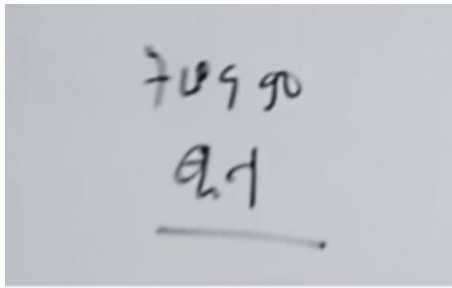
The above graffiti portrays Tigrayans as cannibals. The implicit meaning is that Tigrayans have no morality, or work against morality, and, therefore, they need to be destroyed to preserve Ethiopian moral values. Similar to Debebe Eshetu's claim that Tigrayans are set on fire, which he said, "they deserve", this graffiti also indicated that Tigrayans are already dead.

In December 2018, the state and state-affiliated media ETV, Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta TV, Addis Media Network (AMN), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), and Debub TV disseminated the *Yefitih Sekoka*



documentary, which described Tigrayans as ‘torturers’, ‘murderers’, ‘corrupt’, ‘excruciates’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexual’ and ‘devils’ who stood against Ethiopia’s national interests.<sup>1</sup>

From the socio-historical context, the transition of power from Hailemariam to Abiy was framed as resulting from the public protest movement, in the context of the publicly popular slogan ‘Down, down, Woyane’, contextually referring to Tigrayans as anti-reform (Addis Standard, 2017). While Tigrayans were collectively blamed for the wrongdoings of the EPRDF regime (Tronvoll, 2020), Prime Minister Abiy defined the 27 years of the EPRDF regime as a “dark age” (Mistir, 2019).



**Figure 4.7. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bedbug**

(Captured on 28 December 2020)

An offensive graffiti found in Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School reads: “ትሆናም ጸላ”, which can be interpreted as “bedbug tsila”.

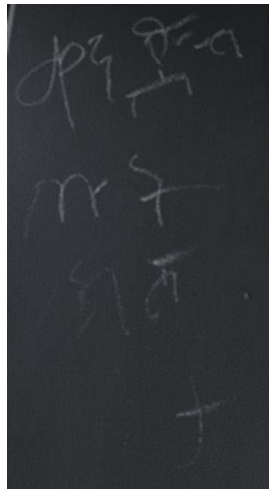
While the soldiers portrayed Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, the term ‘tsila’ is a derogatory hate speech word used to identify Tigrayans as being snitches on other Ethiopians and associated with the power held by the EPRDF regime. A snitch is someone who operates secretly. Declaring military action on Tigray on 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy implied that Tigrayans secretly attacked the ENDF

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<sup>1</sup> The actual words used in the documentary to describe Tigrinya speakers were ደብዳቤዎች (torturers), ነፍሰ ገዳዮች (murderers), ሙሰኞች (corrupt), አሰቃይ (excruciates), መናፍሰት (ghosts), ከሀዲዎች (traitors) ግብረሰዶማውያን (homosexuals) and ሰይጣኖች (devils) (Fana Television, 2018a, translation by author).

from behind, using an analogy of the breastfeeding mother and a child biting the breast that feeds him/her (EBC, 2020c). He said:

*Honoured people of Ethiopia, today traitor Ethiopians poked Ethiopia. Ethiopia, its generous hands and its motherly breasts that fed them, are bitten. The Ethiopia National Defence Force that protected its territory and people, with martyrdom in the thousands, wounded, bled, and suffered in desert forts for the past twenty years, was attacked by traitors and their forces in Mekelle and other areas as of the night. This attack is infamous because the army didn't face such a situation while being in the peacekeeping mission in its history let alone in its country where now is attacked from behind, where many sacrificed martyrdom and were wounded as well as suffered destruction of resources.* (Prime Minister Abiy, EBC, 2020c, 0:00:32-0:01:49)



**Figure 4.8. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Renegades**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Similarly, the ENDF soldiers who camped in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum wrote: “Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bite [their mother’s] breast”. This shows that the mainstream hate speech and dehumanisation utterances were heard and reproduced by the soldiers. Taking these soldiers as one of the primary audiences of the media propaganda messages, the similarity in the mainstreamed utterances and the graffiti writings indicates that the speeches were popular among the soldiers. These soldiers, demonstrate a level of hatred against Tigrayans similar to that which was conveyed by the leaders.

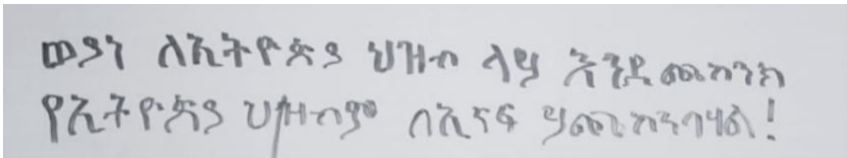
### ***Posing a threat***

Tigrayans were portrayed as alien national security threats to Ethiopia, long before the Tigray war. As a result, they were targeted by the federal government. In media brief Attorney General Adanech Abebe attributed responsibility to ‘Tigrinya speakers’ for planning the assassination of the Oromo musician and activist, Hachalu Hundessa (Fana Television, 2020b).

The documentary ‘Yefitih Sekoka’ (The Agony of Injustice), which was disseminated in all state-owned and ruling party affiliated media in Addis Ababa explicitly used the term ‘Tigrinya speakers’ to refer to ‘criminals’ who were accused of committing human rights violations in prisons. Tigrinya speakers were depicted by the Ethiopian media as less than human, using terms such as ‘weeds’, ‘cancer’, ‘monsters’, ‘devils’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexuals’, and ‘ogres’ who had betrayed their country (Fana Television, 2018). The documentary represented Tigrinya speakers as perpetuating crimes against Ethiopians, and not being Ethiopian themselves.

The graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

*Woyane as you were brutal for the people of Ethiopia, the people of Ethiopia now doubled its brutality on you!*



**Figure 4.9. Graffiti from Emperor Yohanes School: on brutality**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

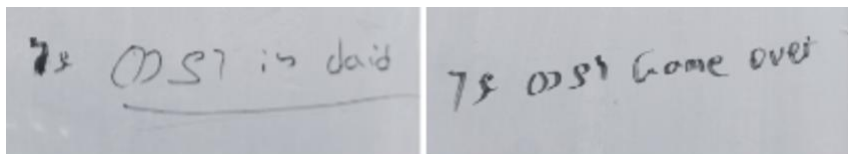
The Ethiopian soldiers were coached to be brutal with Tigrayans. Andargachew Tsige, a leader of the Ginbot-7, an armed group based in Eritrea to fight Ethiopia under the EPRDF, which was labelled a terrorist organisation by the then Ethiopian parliament, instructed Ethiopian soldiers as follows:

*Because there is no other choice, engage them with all the brutality; in your full capacity of brutality without any humanity. Avoiding any Amharan Ethiopian benignancy, without hesitation, whatever it requires, I am frankly speaking, we need*

*to face them with all the brutalities we can [applause] with all the brutalities.*  
(Andargachew Tsige’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48; Daniel, 2021)<sup>2</sup>

Andargachew Tsige, said that Ethiopians must face Tigray with all the brutality it could muster. Such instructions did not come in isolation. Eritrean President Isayas said “Game over Woyane” three months before the power transition in Ethiopia from Prime Minister Hailemariam to Abiy. Many of the former rebel groups sponsored by Eritrea joined Abiy’s government, some of them through formal position and others as internal advisors.

The design of the law enforcement operation can be interpreted as a translation of the ‘Game over’ policy, which can be traced back to Eritrean President Isayas’ speech on 14 January 2018 (ERi-TV, 2018a) (ERi-TV, 2018b). The law enforcement operation put the ‘Game over’ policy into action.



**Figure 4.10. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Game Over**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Graffiti messages such as ‘Woyane, game over’ and ‘Woyane is dead’ were commonly seen. These expressions have seemingly evolved into a widely embraced consensus among the soldiers regarding the necessary course of action in their context.

Signs of the Eritrea military participating in the invasion are left on the walls of the hospital in Geru Sirmay. A picture captured in Gerhu

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<sup>2</sup> አብረን ለመሰዋት ዝግጁ የሆንን በአገር ውስጥና ከ አገር ውጪ በርካታ ኢትዮጵያውያን እንዳሉ አውቃችሁ አምርራችሁ ሌላ ምርጫ ስለሌለን ነው። አምርራችሁ ያለምንም ርህራሄ ያለምንም አማራጭ ኢትዮጵያዊ ደግነት ያለምንም መወላወል በሚያስፈልገው ማንኛውም እውነቱን ነው የምናገረው አረመኔያዊ በሆነ ጭካኔ ነው ልንጋፈጣቸው የሚገባው (ጨብጨብ) አረመኔያዊ በሆነ ጭካኔ (Andargachew Tsige’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48; Daniel, 2021).

Sirnay Hospital reads “ኤርትራ ትስዕር”, which is literally translated as “Eritrea is winning” or “Eritrea will win”.



**Figure 4.11. Graffiti on the wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital: Eritrea will win**

(Captured on 9 July 2023)

The broader meaning of the message can be understood as: we take pride in our actions and have demonstrated our capabilities. The graffiti “ኣዖ ወይን,” translates to “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”, deriding the Tigrayan community. This graffiti, found on a wall, was discovered following the destruction of the hospital by soldiers. The message conveys a sense of satisfaction in the completion of the devastation.

A retired Ethiopian military officer, Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, who re-joined the ENDF military leadership during the Tigray war following Prime Minister Abiy’s call (Fana Television, 2020a), stated:

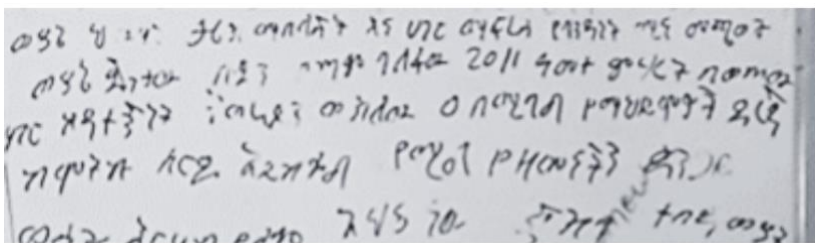
*When the Tigrinya speakers were leaders in the [ENDF] military, soldiers used to fire guns on the public. By then bullets were fired on the public. Now the public wholeheartedly is by the side of the [Ethiopian] military to deter their attempt to*

*break up Ethiopia. So this is a great capacity.* (Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, 7 September 2021, Addis Walta-AW, 2021, 33:17-33:37)<sup>3</sup>

In this speech Tigrayans were represented as anti-Ethiopian national unity, working to break up Ethiopia. This can be seen in this graffiti:

*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 የማህይሞቶች ደረጃ ከሞትኩ ሰርዶ አይብቀል የሚል የዘመናችን ድንጋይ አህያ ነው ተ\*\*ዳ ወያኔ።*

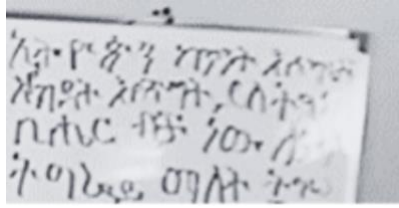
*The dreams of Woyane is destroying history, destruction of country and acting the role of bandits. In the last 2011 (Ethiopian Calendar), Woyane Junta group representing Tigray won 0 award of the ignorants for being traitors. They practiced there is no need for the grass to grow after my passing away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



**Figure 4.12. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bandit**  
(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Through the military and political leadership, the portrayal to Ethiopian audiences of Tigrayans as bandits whose aim was to destroy the country was used to mobilise Ethiopians to join the ENDF. These messages were consumed by the soldiers as evidenced in the graffiti writings. In the graffiti, the soldiers explicitly framed ethnic Tigrayans as traitors, who sold Ethiopia for other benefits.

<sup>3</sup> በመከላከያ ዉስጥ የነበሩ የትግርኛ ተናጋሪ አመራሮች በነበሩበት ሰአት እኩ ህዝብ ላይ እየተተኮሰ ነበረ። ያኔ ህዝብ ላይ ይተኮስ ነበር። አሁን ደግሞ ህዝቡ ከሰራዊቱ ጋር ሆኖ እነዚህ ኢትዮጵያን ለመበተን በሚፈልጉበት ሰአት በነቁስ ተሰልፎ ነው ያለው። ስለዚህ ይህ ትልቅ አቅም ነው። (Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, 7 September 2021, Addis Walta-AW, 2021, 33:17–33:37)



**Figure 4.13. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Betrayers**  
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 4.13 reads:

*ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት እስካሁን ለክደት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነው። ለምን?*

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

The hate speech campaign was supported by celebrities and well-known personalities whose views matter when it comes to influencing public opinion. The representation of Tigrayans as traitors and enemies was reinforced by popular prominent artists from the country’s film industry. Among them, artist Chirotaw Kelkay said:

*How these could be our people? It is amazing. How could we feel sympathy for them? Should we wait until they come and slaughter us.* (Artist Chirotaw Kelkay’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:23–4:33)<sup>4</sup>

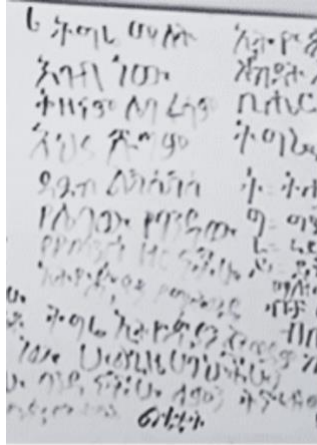
He advanced the claim that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians. Artist Abrar Abdo said:

*They capture video and show the world that Ethiopian soldiers gunned them down reversing the truth. They do this all the time. How could we feel sympathy for these? How could we be able to think they are Ethiopians? This discourse that they still are our people, or something like that, doesn’t work. They are not.* (Artist Abrar Abdo’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> እንዴት ነው ታድያ እነዚህ ወገኖቻችን ሊሆኑ የሚችሉት እኛ በጣም የሚደንቅ እኮ ነገር ነው እንዴት ነው እኛ ለነሱ አዝነን የምንጠብቀው እዚህ መጥተው እስኪያርዱን (Artist Chirotaw Kelkay’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:23-4:33).

<sup>5</sup> ያንን ደግሞ በፊልም አንስተው ለአለም የኢትዮጵያ ወታደር እንደዚህ ነው የሚረሸነው ብለው በተቃራኒው ገልብጠው ስንት ግፍ ነው የሚሰራው ለነኚህ እንዴት ነው የምናዝነው ለነኚህ እንዴት ነው ኢትዮጵያዊ ናቸው አሁንም ምናምን ወገኖቻችን በፍፁም አይሰራም አይደሉም (Artist Abrar Abdo’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television 4:34-4:48).



**Figure 4.14. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Snakes**  
 (Captured on 27 December 2020)

In this graffiti, Tigrayans are framed as snakes. The graffiti reads:

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

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

A snake in the Ethiopian context is understood as someone who needs to be killed by whatever means before it suddenly bites you with its poison. Thus, the graffiti portrayed ethnic Tigrayans as inhuman, snakes, and killing them is considered self-defence. This was first said by the Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who described Tigrayans as monsters, devils, and snakes (Tebta Mar, 2019).<sup>6</sup>

Another dimension of demonising ethnic Tigrayans is by associating culturally sensitive words with Tigrayans. Comparable to the representation of Tigrayans as ‘homosexuals’ in the Yefitih Sekoka (The Agony of Injustice) documentary (Fana Television, 2018a,

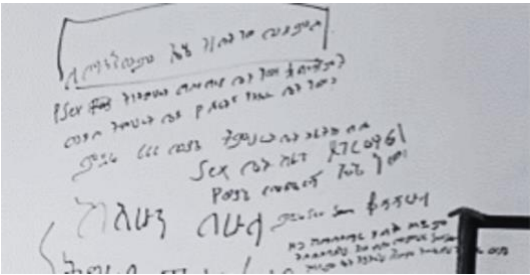
<sup>6</sup> The original words in Amharic by the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, are ጭራቅ (monsters), አጋንንት (devils) and እባብ (snake) (Tebta Mar, 2019).



translation by authors), the following graffiti portray Tigrayans as the devil. The graffiti is an excerpt from Emperor Yohannes School, stating 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 ዜጋኮማስተማር 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], Woyane opened a sexual education, assuming it as a school. This is Woyane's dead end. This garbage is where you collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth can you be considered a teacher. You and your grandfather are used to condoms, Woyane.*



**Figure 4.15. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Devils**  
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

According to Benesch (2014), incitement speech often references the target groups as pests, vermin, insects, or animals, as such dehumanisation tends to make killing seem acceptable.

***Incitement towards the elimination of the group***

During the times of political turmoil, the diaspora-based medium, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) used an ethnically motivated framing to instigate Ethiopians standing together against the TPLF/EPRDF rule in general and Tigrayans in particular. ESAT called for action against Tigrayans in a broadcast by journalist Mesay Mekonen on 6 August 2016, referring to Tigrayan people as “(deformed) fish” that should be removed:

*This delinquency plan is 5 million people [Tigrayans] to 95 million people [all other Ethiopians]. So, the one and the only way of exterminating the deformed fish from the sea is through dispelling the sea. Thus, without doubt, we call for all to begin taking our measures wherever we are. (Mesay Mekonen, disseminated by ESAT on 6 August 2016, documented by Tghat, 2021, translation by authors)<sup>7</sup>*

The graffiti depicted in Figure 4.16, found in Emperor Yohannes School, reads:

*ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት አስካሁን ለኪዳን አየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነዉ ለምን?*

*ትግራይ ማለት*

*ት=ትኩላን ማለት ነዉ*

*ግ=ግንድ አንሳ*

*ራ= ራይጥ አይጠመግጥ*

*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*

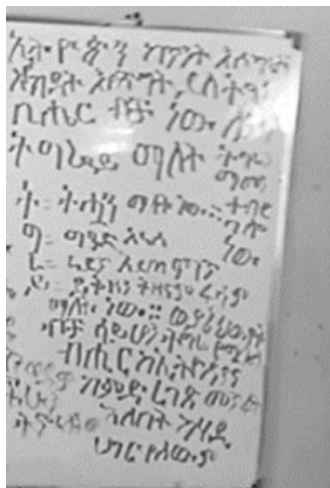
*R= Rats and rodents*

*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.*

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<sup>7</sup> The original Amharic version of ESAT's call to Ethiopians is as follows: “ይህ የጥፋት እቅድ የታቀደው ከ5 ሚልዮን ህዝብ ለ95 ሚልዮን ህዝብ ነው። ስለዚህ የተበላሸን አሳ ከባህር ማስወገጃ መንገዱ አንዱ ነው የባህሩ ወሃ ማስወገድ። ስለዚህ ሳናመታህ ሁላችንም በየለንበት እርምጃችንን እንድንጀምር ጥሪ እናስተላልፋለን።”



**Figure 4.16. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Elimination**  
 (Captured on 28 December 2020)

This graffiti indicates the eradication of ethnic Tigrayans as a solution for Ethiopians to protect themselves from external threats. The soldiers also portrayed Tigrayans as bedbugs, stem stealers, rats and rodents whose mass killing and suffering is irrelevant and insignificant as they are not human beings.

Members of the Amhara Fano were also among the perpetrators of the incitement to violence. A member of the Amhara Fano leadership Mesafint Tesfu said:

*If we are allowed, we urge that as they are defiant, Tigray is too small for us. We will clutch it, [applause continues for 7 seconds]. We will bring the factories you know there. Unless anyone is able to bring it for us, we will by ourselves [acclaim continues for 8 seconds].* (Mesafint Tesfu on 6 December 2018, Documented in Ab sha Tube, 2020, translation by authors)

A member of the Amhara Fano group also stated that the leaders who incite violence had support on the ground, already a year before the breakout of the Tigray war. A member of the Amhara Fano said:

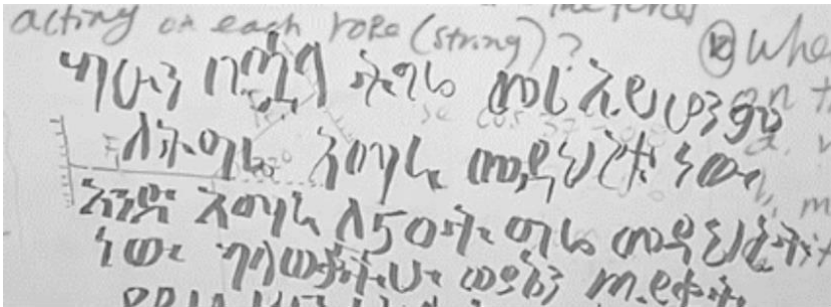
*Instead of dying for nothing, it is worthy to die killing one Tigrayan. Maybe the population of Tigray is 6 million while the population of Amhara is around 30 million. Perhaps if we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray, the remaining people will be liberated.* (A member of Amhara Fano, 16 October 2019,

ዲጂታል አማራ ፋኖ, documented by Gebrekristos, 2020, translation by authors)

A piece of graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes school reads:

ካሁን በኋላ ትግሬ መሪ አይሆንም ለትግሬ አማራ መዳህኒቱ ነገ አንድ አማራ ለ50 ትግሬ መዳህኒቱ ነገ ካላወቃችሁ ወያኔን ጠይቋት

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



**Figure 4.17. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayan would never be a leader**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

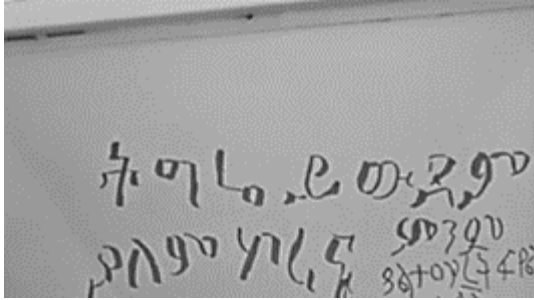
This graffiti reinforces the incitement calls by the Amhara Fano members discussed above. This may indicate that the incitement to violence is copied by the soldiers.

The graffiti writing in the Emperor Yohannes School showed similar utterances encouraging extermination. The graffiti reads:

ትግሬ ይውደም ያለም ኮሮና።

It can be translated as:

*Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.*



**Figure 4.18. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigranayns as Corona Virus**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The dehumanisation campaigns against Tigrayans extended from the portrayal of Tigrayans as a threat to national unity and framing Tigrayans as a threat to the world.

The authoritative national Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA) stated that a solution for the stability of the Horn of Africa would be realised following the termination of TPLF. The report said:

*The noticeable symbolic change in the landscape is the irrevocable termination of TPLF, a prominent political and military power that had been destabilising and creating havoc in the nation's politics and the politics of the horn as well. (Solomon, 2020)*

This was stated in a context in which the demarcations between TPLF and the Tigrayan people was increasingly blurred. Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, said on 12 November 2020:

*These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on the Earth. We shall not allow them to live like human beings. We must turn them back to hell. (EBC, 2020a, 00:42:23-00:42:40, translation by authors)*

Referring to the people of Tigray, on 5 September 2021, the President of the Amhara Regional State, Agegnehu Teshagar, said:

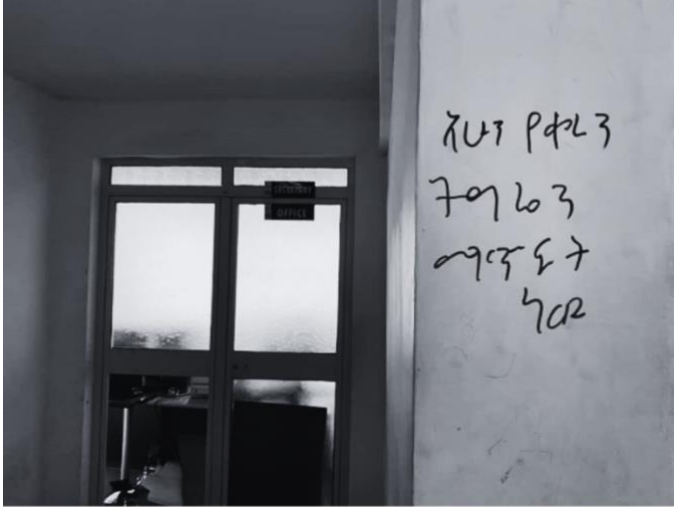
*These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia. These people are enemies of Afar, enemies of Gambella, and enemies of Somali. (Yabele Media, 2021, translation by authors)*

A piece of graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School reads:

አሁን የቀረን ጉግሬን ማጥፋት ነው።

This can be translated as:

*Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.*



**Figure 4.19. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Eradicate Tigrayans**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The similarities in the speeches and graffiti writings are striking. They may indicate that the elimination of the Tigrayans as an out-group was progressively seen as an acceptable solution to maintain Ethiopian unity. On 18 September 2021, Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who has a background as a deacon in the Orthodox Church, said:

*As you know, after the fall of Satan, there was nothing like Satan that was created... Satan was the last of his kind. And they (the TPLF) must also remain the last of their kind. There should be no land in this country that can sustain this kind of weed. (Daniel Kibret, 18 September 2021 disseminated by Fana Television, documented by AFP, 2021)*

Speaking to a televised gathering, Daniel Kibret added:

*We must exterminate them not only from their conformation but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, and from the historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country.* (Daniel Kibret, 18 September 2021 disseminated by Fana Television, documented by Galama Dhugaa, 2021, translation by authors)<sup>8</sup>

Religious leaders were among the proponents of the mainstreamed incitement of the extermination of Tigrayans. An Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest was quoted as saying:

*All of them [Tigrayans], both intellectuals and ordinary people are mad. So if a person is mad, before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed. The government called for a ceasefire for the sake of reconciliation assuming the criminals would surrender; however, since they [the Tigrayans] are mad to accept the reality, we priests have to baptise them with fire. If they refuse water they have to be baptised with fire.* (Theodros, 2022)

Another religious leader of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church said:

*This Woyane must be buried. It is anti-Ethiopia; it is anti-Orthodox; it is anti-Muslim; it is anti-protestant.* (Religious leader’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 6:49–6:56)<sup>9</sup>

The graffiti found in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle says:

ስማቸው ገ/እ/ሐር ስራቸው ጻረ እ/ሐር።

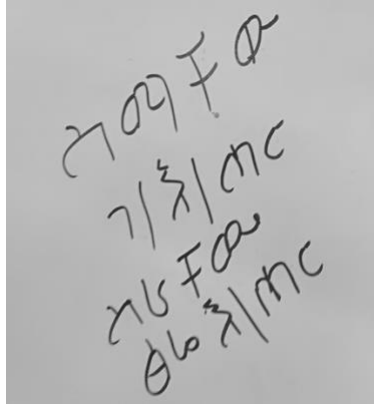
Translated as:

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

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<sup>8</sup> Original text, Daniel Kibret: “እንደነሱ አይነት ሰው ዳግም እንዳይፈጠር እዚች አገር ላይ እንዳይታሰብ ከመቀጠሉ በታችው ብቻ አይደለም ማስወገድ ያለብን ከሰው ህሊና ከሰው ልቦና ውስጥ ከታሪክ መዝገብ ውስጥ ነው ተፍቆ መጥፋት ያለባቸው።” (Galama Dhugaa, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> ይህን ወያኔ መቀበር አለበት። ጻረ-ኢትዮጵያ ነው፤ ጻረ-አርቶዶክስ ነው፤ ጻረ-ሙስሊም ነው፤ ጻረ-ፕሮቴስታንት ነው። (Religious leader’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 6:49–6:56).



**Figure 4.20. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Tigrayans as anti-religion**

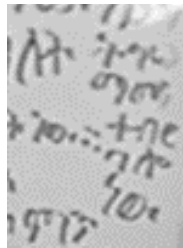
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

In a strongly religiously defined social system, as in Ethiopia, labelling someone as anti-religion brings moral shame and stigma from the religious population. It can cause Tigrayans to be isolated from religious practices and social life with others. Tigrayans were also portrayed as untrustworthy people whose death is the way to address the insecurity of others. The graffiti in Figure 4.21 reads:

**ትግሬን ማመን ቀጠሮ ገሎ ነው።**

It can be translated as:

*To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.*



**Figure 4.21. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them**

(Captured on 17 April 2021)



The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Bahir Dar Synod Chief Executive, Melakeselam Efreem Mulualem, and Amhara Regional Muslim Higher Council President, Shek Seid Mohammed, described Tigrayans as ‘anti-religion’, as part of the call to Ethiopians to join the law and order enforcement operation by the government (Amhara Media Corporation, 2021).

Economic leaders operated as actors in the incitement of violence. In encouraging mobilised military trainees in Amhara, Werku Aytenew, the well-known exporter of sesame and producer of oil using crop inputs from Western Tigray, referred to Tigrayans saying:

*These are evils. Not only does killing them and seeing them dying give pleasure, but it is also a pleasure to roast and eat them like a goat.* (Worku Aytenew’s speech as documented by ዓለም Tube, 2021)<sup>10</sup>

There are indicators that part of the public supported the hostile narratives of the government and leadership by participating in mobilisation conferences, anti-Woyane rallies, and music shows which were widely disseminated through media. These events disseminated the narrative that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security (EBC, 2020b, 0:39:35).

A graffiti from the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum reads:

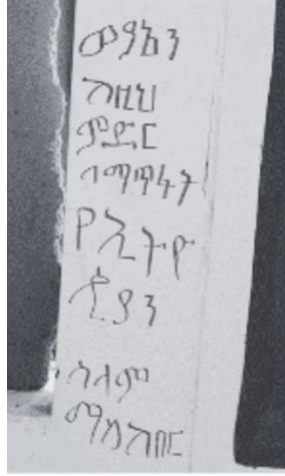
**ወያኔን ከዚህ ምድር በማጥፋት የኢትዮጵያን ሰላም ማስከበር**

This is translated as:

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

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<sup>10</sup>አንደኛው አይነት እርኩሶች እነዚህ ገድለህ መሞት አይደለም እንደ ፍየል ጠብሰህ በልተህ መሞት ራሱ በጣም ትልቅ ነገር ነው (ዓለም Tube, 2021)።

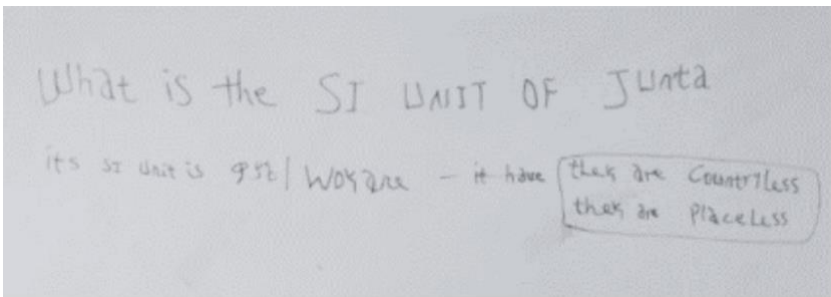


**Figure 4.22. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Eradicating Woyane from the Earth**  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

This graffiti framed Woyane and Tigrayans as responsible for eroding Ethiopians’ stability, thus, eradicating them is the only solution for Ethiopia to regain its stability.

Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School also reiterated that Tigrayans are non-Ethiopian. It refers to the out-group of Tigrayans as non-Ethiopian enemies, country-less and placeless:

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



**Figure 4.23. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayans as countryless**  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

Consistent with the hate speech, dehumanisation, and incitement to violence campaigns, the Ethiopian government revealed its intention to annihilate Tigrayans when speaking to the European Union's Special Envoy and Finland's Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto. In speaking about the meeting he said:

*When I met the Ethiopian leadership in February they really used this kind of language, that they are going to destroy the Tigrayans, they are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years, and so forth.* (Dyer, 2021; Anna, 2021)

These annihilation plans of the leaders were reflected by the soldiers in the graffiti and translated into action.

## **Discussion**

This chapter explored how media hate speech and incitement campaigns are related to the mobilisation of soldiers in the Tigray war, using the criteria of Waller (2002) on negative stereotyping, the narrative of the targeted group forming a threat, and incitement towards the elimination of the group. In this chapter, excerpts from narratives from the top leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea were compared with texts found in graffiti left by soldiers deployed in Tigray. In this study leaders from the top were identified as political leaders at national or regional level, religious leaders, economic leaders and celebrities. The study looked at the parallels in their narratives with those of the foot soldiers deployed in Tigray.

On stereotyping, we found that leaders used terms such as: 'daytime hyena', 'ghosts', 'homosexual', 'devils'; 'monster', 'snake', 'ogre', and 'mouse'. In the graffiti of the soldiers, these and similar terms were also found: 'daytime hyena', 'hyena', 'bedbug', 'tsila', 'Satan', 'snake', 'donkey', 'rat', 'rodent', and 'mouse'.

Characterising the Tigrayans as a threat, the narratives disseminated by the leadership contained descriptive elements and qualifications such as: 'weed', 'cancer', 'traitors', 'corrupt', 'excruciates', 'junta', 'anti-Ethiopian', 'brutal', 'anti-religion', 'enemies', 'murderers', 'torturers', and 'people who bite their mother's breast that feeds them'. Among the graffiti the soldiers who were deployed in Tigray left, the following terms were found: 'cannibals', 'thief', 'looters', 'corona',

‘betrayers’, ‘bandit’, ‘junta’, ‘poor’, ‘hopeless’, ‘coward’, ‘fart’, ‘stupid’, ‘stem stealers’, and ‘renegade who bites their mother’s breast’.

Advocacy for a solution to eliminating the threat ranges from (quotas) and discrimination (legal segregation) imposed on the target, to expulsion (ethnic cleansing), and in extreme hate discourse refers to killing, extermination, and annihilation. In the narratives disseminated by the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the following examples of public reasoning was found:

- Tigray is too small for us; we will clutch it.
- If we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray the remaining people will be liberated.
- Irrevocable termination of TPLF
- These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on Earth; we shall not allow them to live like human beings. We must turn them back to hell.
- These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia; these people are enemies to Afar, enemies to Gambella, enemies to Somali.
- We must exterminate them, not only from their conformation, but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, from the historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country.
- Before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed.
- These are evils. Not only killing them and dying, it is a pleasure to roast and eat them like a goat.
- Wipe out Tigrayans for 100 years.

In the graffiti left by soldiers deployed in Tigray the following reasoning was found:

- Not only Woyane, TPLF, but the ethnic group named Tigrayan must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth. Traitors don’t have a country.
- Forever from now onwards, Tigrayan would never be a leader again.
- One Amharan will suffice to deal with 50 Tigrayans.
- Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.

- Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.
- Their name is G/her [God's servant], while their actions are against God.
- By eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace.
- They are countryless, they are placeless.
- To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.

The narratives themselves are performative, as is the writing of the graffiti. The war in Tigray resulted in acts of the destruction of health facilities; the destruction of the means of production; a siege, humanitarian blockade, and complete communication blackout; sexual violence; massacres and extrajudicial killings; and drone attacks and bombardments on civilians (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024b; Kahsay B., 2024a; Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024; Kahsay B., 2024b; Kahsay Z., 2024; Medhanyie *et al.*, 2024; Taye *et al.*, 2024; Tefera, 2024).

Direct and public incitement to genocide is among the crimes that are prohibited in United Nations (UN) Resolution 260 Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Article 3 explains that the following acts shall be punishable: (a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; (e) Complicity in genocide (UN, 1948).

Words can lead to genocide (Wilson, 2015). The negative stereotyping of Tigrayans, combined with the narratives that they pose a collective threat, as well as the incitement to exterminate Tigrayans, can be qualified as dangerous hate speech (Waller, 2002). This ethnographic research shows that this hate speech prevented the soldiers from seeing Tigrayans as being human. Further research is needed to legally determine whether this speech reflects an intent of genocide.

## **Conclusion**

This research analysed the content of speeches made by Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders alongside text written by foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war to explore negative stereotyping, the creation of threats, and incitement to genocide. A collection of graffiti found in

locations used as barracks by Ethiopian soldiers in Tigray was examined. The themes in this graffiti were compared with those expressed by political, religious, and economic leaders, as well as by celebrities and artists. The findings reveal that the soldiers employed similar themes to those propagated by leaders and celebrities in public media, depicting Tigrayans as a threat to the nation.

Hate speech and incitement by the leadership were reflected in graffiti by the foot soldiers deployed in Tigray. This included the use of derogatory terms like ‘cannibal’, ‘daytime hyena’, ‘rat’, ‘bedbug’, ‘traitor’, ‘thief’, ‘ghosts’, ‘homosexual’, ‘monster’, ‘snake’, and ‘devil’ in reference to Tigrayans. These messages were spread by leaders, and these themes were reflected in the graffiti soldiers deployed in Tigray on the walls of their barracks. Alarming, some of these statements referred to the extermination of the Tigrayan people as a ‘solution’ to the country’s situation.

This research suggests that expressions of leaders, media campaigns and graffiti converged in similar derogatory language and themes, which constituted overt and public incitements. The soldiers, influenced by these narratives, echoed messages of annihilation through graffiti in public spaces in Tigray. The dehumanising portrayals of Tigrayans escalated from generalised accusations of human rights abuses to overt calls for the eradication of the people of Tigray, painting them as subhuman beings unworthy of existing.

This ethnographic study concludes that negative stereotyping and framing of Tigrayans as a ‘threat’ led to language that directly incited the extermination of the Tigrayan people. Considering the performative nature of speech, the study recommends further investigation into genocidal intent.

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## **Authors' contributions**

This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study by Daniel Tesfa, who put together the first version of this chapter. Daniel Tesfa provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Daniel Tesfa collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Daniel Tesfa also wrote the section on the research approach. Daniel Tesfa produced an extensive database with all expressions from different communicators. He verified the origin and carried out the translation. Mirjam Van Reisen provided guidance on the research at all stages, and reviewed the raw data, reviewed the data analysis and contributed to the writing and editing of all versions of the article.

## **Ethical considerations**

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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