‘The Child of Fire is Ash’: The Lack of a Human Rights Culture

B. G. Kahsay

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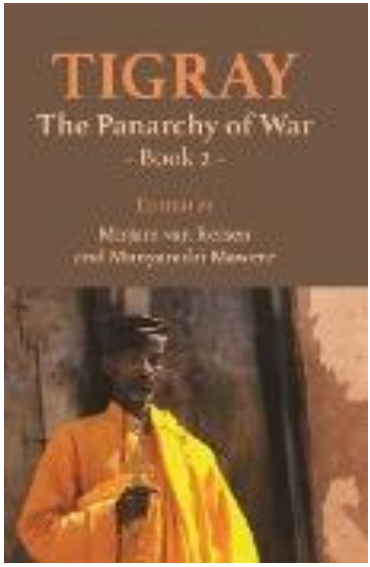

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Chapter 8

‘The Child of Fire is Ash’: The Lack of a Human Rights Culture

B. G. Kahsay

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The Child [Son] of Fire is Ash!

Abstract

Conflicting parties often have distinct ethnic identities influenced by historical and structural factors. Ethnic conflicts stem from historical events that shape intergroup relations, leading to aggression and the politicisation of ethnic identities. In Ethiopia, accusations against Tigrayans, who have been conflated with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), have been a major cause of human rights violations, especially affecting perceptions among the Amhara. In Eritrea, a sense of superiority over Tigrayans has contributed to harsh actions, despite a shared history and culture prior to Italian colonisation, which introduced a semi-racist attitude among Eritrean elites. This demonstrates a lack of human rights culture. Human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rome Statute, are universal and apply to all individuals. The Rome Statute outlines crimes against humanity, including various acts of violence and persecution. Despite a general acceptance of these rights in the study area, the study emphasises the need for increased education on human rights in the Horn of Africa, especially given the confusion resulting from political narratives, which has fuelled atrocities.

Keywords: Tigray war, human rights culture, human rights education

Introduction

Human beings have rights merely because they are human (Donders, 2010). Humanity, as it refers to all human beings collectively, is the fundamental standard for the development of human rights (Coupland, 2013). Human beings can be characterised as social animals (Aronson, 2018), live in structured social groups, and communicate and interact with each other (Sakman, 2019) based on their shared way-of-life or culture, which can be diverse depending on where they are and to which ethnic group they belong. Conflicts (including conflicts between ethnic groups) are an intrinsic feature of human relations and have occurred repeatedly on a large scale since time immemorial (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 2014). Cultural differences are socially constructed and these differences in lived experiences contribute to the formation of ethnic groups (Gagnon, 2004). Being uprooted entails having no physical place in the world that is acknowledged and secured by others, whereas being superfluous entails having no place in the world at all (Arendt, 1958). As isolation might – but must not – be the precursor to loneliness, uprooting can be the condition that leads to superfluousness (Arendt, 1958). Loneliness is the acknowledgment of a condition in which humans do not exist as fully human beings with enjoyment of their human rights (Arendt, 1958). Rorty (1993) advances in his theory of human rights culture that education of sentiments is critical to the advancement of human rights.

This research explores how 'being human' and, consequently, being eligible for human rights, is understood in the context of the war in Tigray. The research attempted to observe, describe, and analyse the experience of the human rights violations in Tigray in view of a theoretical exploration of the concept of 'human rights culture' (Rorty, 1993). The research question is: *How are human rights understood in the context of the war in Tigray?*

Methodology

This small ethnographic study employed observations through visits and interviews with internally displaced people (IDP) as tools to

gather primary data. Four case studies were conducted in the form of an in-depth study of the situation.

The research employed a qualitative approach. The research is based on the primary data collected from various locations in Tigray regional state. The locations visited include: Chercher area in Southern Tigray; Mekelle; Aby-adi and Aksum in Central Tigray; Gulomekeda, Bizet, and Adigrat in Eastern Tigray; and Shire (home to more than half a million IDPs during the study period). The rationale for the selection of these locations was that these areas were reported as having high number of IDPs. Further, these are the areas that experienced and reported high incidences of atrocities and human rights violations. Some interviews were also conducted in Mekelle city for the research.

The interviews, observations, and case study methods are detailed in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1. Overview of the research methods and locations

Method	Selection	Location	Time
16 interviews with community members	Coincidence and purposive	Chercher, Abi-Adi, Mekelle, Adigrat, Gulomekeda, Bizet, Axum, Shire	March-July 2021
5 interviews with Tigray academics	Purposive	Mekelle	March-July 2021
3 interviews with Tigray political leaders	Purposive	Mekelle	March-July 2021
4 Case stories	Purposive	Adigrat, Shire	April 2021
Observation	Systematic	Chercher, Abi-Adi, Mekelle, Adigrat, Gulomekeda, Bizet, Axum, Shire	March-July 2021

Observations: Throughout the data collection period, the researcher was in the Tigray region. Physical visits were made to some of the locations where the alleged human rights violations occurred. Along with the interviews in March to July 2021, field observations were also made to observe the conditions of the uprooted people and the physical and mental conditions of the research participants.

Interviews: A total of 16 civilian community members were interviewed (12 women and 4 men), as well as 5 Tigray academics (2 women, 3 men) and 3 members of the political leadership. The interviews were conducted from March to July 2021. People whose relatives had been killed were interviewed. The participants were community members who were available during the research visits to the IDP towns. Purposive sampling was used for the Tigrayan academics and political elite, based on their area of expertise to complement the research fundings as resource persons who could comment on the findings.

To ensure that the information presented can be understood in relation to the research participants, the participants' backgrounds have been highlighted, but their identities have been anonymised. The interviews were collected in Tigrinya and translated into English. The information was recorded using a notebook. No digital recording was employed. As the researcher is a Tigrinya speaker, services of a translator were not used.

Case studies: In addition, four case studies were collected from Adigrat and Shire towns from the people who experienced human rights violations during the war. The case studies served as a gateway to delve deep into the situation. The case studies were collected in April 2021.

Secondary data: Secondary data (documents, social media footage, TV reports and video documentaries) were used as general background on the situation.

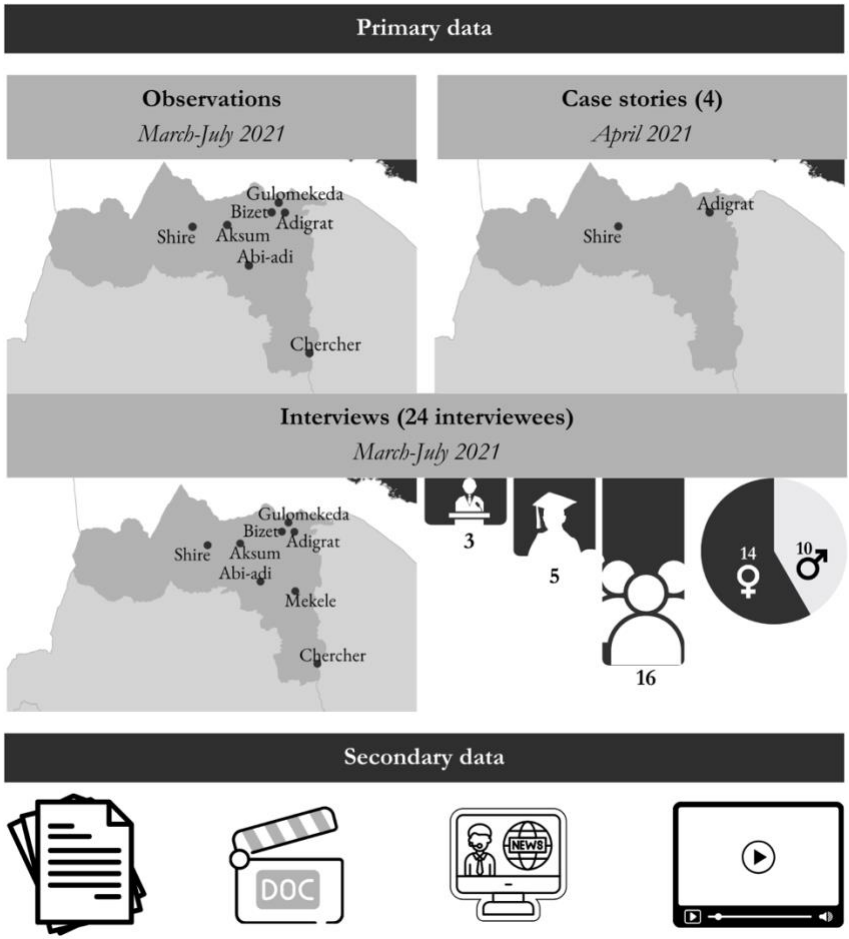

Figure 8.1. Overview of the data collected and used in the study

Background

Due to the war on Tigray, more than 2.2 million people were displaced within Tigray (UNOCHA, 2021), while an estimated 61,000 people crossed into Sudan as refugees (UNFPA, 2021). At the end of February 2021, 4.5 million people in Tigray were reported to be in urgent need of humanitarian support; towards the middle of May 2021, this figure increased to 5.2 million people (Annys *et al.*, 2021). A Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development-led multi-agency assessment found that the total number of people in the Tigray region in need of relief support in 2022 had reached 6.5 million (BoARD, 2022).

The destruction and disruption of basic services – such as the health system, education facilities, water supply systems, agricultural resources including cutting of live fruit trees, private and public factories and industries, and communication facilities – had been reported (Kahsay, 2021). The closing of the banking system, blockage of communication services, and disruption of transport and supply chains in Tigray have led to millions of people suffering from hunger and other challenges (Kahsay, 2021). During the war, starvation, rape, torture, forced displacement, massacres, and ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch, 2022), as well as violation of the rights of refugees, have all been reported (World Peace Foundation, 2021).

During the war in Tigray, millions of people were forced to leave their residence and became (internally and externally) displaced (UNOCHA, 2021). The removal of Tigrayans from various regions of Tigray went beyond a simple uprooting. Repeated calls have been made by concerned parties for the international community to intervene to assist the people of Tigray with humanitarian aid and to protect them from human rights violations (Feldstein, 2020; De Waal, 2020).

Theoretical perspectives

Before we discuss human rights and human rights culture, it is necessary to look at the term 'humanity'. The term humanity refers to human beings collectively; it can also mean the quality of being humane or benevolent towards fellow humans (Coupland, 2013). The second definition refers to the solidarity between humans, while the first meaning serves as the foundation for the formation of human rights that are equal for all people simply because they are humans. There is a fundamental intrinsic harmony between the natural tendency of human beings "to preserve one's existence" and an understanding of our moral responsibilities (Zwart, 2014). Zwart explains that this harmony exists between what humans want to attain and what ought to be accomplished (Zwart, 2014).

For Coupland (2001), humanity is interpreted in terms of people's security and wellbeing. A universally applicable and objective definition of humanity is proposed to clarify the complex

relationships between humanity, inhumanity, the capacity for armed violence, the restraint of armed violence, and international law (Coupland, 2001).

If the concept of humanity binds us, the concept of ethnic identities highlights differences. Ethnic conflict is the result of historical discourses in which the narratives affect relationships among ethnic groups such that they cause resentment between them (Weir, 2012). Conflict usually occurs when there is a difference in desires, values, or thoughts, and when there is no way of settling the disagreement that is acceptable to the different groups (Obah-Akpowoghaha *et al.*, 2013). Conflicts caused by or exacerbated by ethnic issues can result in massive material devastation, substantial loss of life, and the violation of basic human rights, especially in cultures where human rights are not widely recognised (Williams, 2015).

International human rights law, being made principally for peacetime, applies to all people around the world (ICRC, 2003). International humanitarian law seeks to rescue what convincingly can be protected from war (Tomuschat, 2010). People who are not, or are no longer, participating in armed violence are protected by international humanitarian law; hence, parties involved in a fight must always differentiate between fighters and non-combatants. With a firm political and philosophical basis, the international human rights movement is moving forward with the hotly debated claim that human rights values are universal – not culturally dependent – and, thus, can be used to comprehend, appraise, and influence international actors (Slye, 1994).

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was initiated in 1948, both the theoretical and practical facets of human rights were tested by the argument about culture and human rights – or cultural relativism versus universalism (Slye, 1994). The universal human rights agenda has provided the world with a framework that legitimises struggles against the violation of essential human rights (Ishay, 2008). The International Committee of the Red Cross sees that "human rights are inherent entitlements which belong to every person as a consequence of being human" (ICRC, 2003). However, despite the number of countries ratifying the basic international

human rights treaties, contemporary discussions are still contesting and debating the universality and efficiency of human rights management (Slye, 1994). Hence, it is relevant at this point to discuss these two concepts relating to human rights: universalism and cultural relativism.

Advocates of human rights universalism believe that human rights, fundamentally, should be universal, notwithstanding the existence of diverse cultural contexts (Tubor, 2019). Cranston defines human rights as common moral rights, something that all people everywhere should enjoy, and asserts that they are universal rights (Cranston, 1973). According to human rights universalism theory, human beings have human rights by virtue of being human, such rights are immutable and intended to protect human dignity, and all persons should enjoy them equally (Donders, 2010).

Universal human rights represent the overall determination and pledge of the international community to revere and defend humanity, "which carries greater legitimacy, primacy and urgency than any cultural interest" (Asomah, 2015, p.134). As a result, human rights represent a wider agreement concerning human dignity than any specific value, which implies that human rights must not be ignored or 'banned' solely based on cultural norms, practices and values (Asomah, 2015). Human rights must be respected in all nations and prevail even when they contradict specific cultural or religious practices, as they are guaranteed in international agreements and resolutions (Musalo, 2015). This understanding is based on the notion of the equal, indivisible, and universal nature of human rights (Lakatos, 2018). Advocates of cultural relativism claim that local cultures can ensure human dignity (Asomah, 2015).

Ayton-Shenker (2014) finds that to have a universal set of moral or legal canons that ensure human freedom and safety, resulting from multiplicity and the context-specific feature of moral values, would be ethically mistaken and morally unmerited. The relativist viewpoint mirrors the pragmatic reality that there is vast cultural diversity around the globe, including varied understandings of right and wrong (Donnelly, 1989; Steiner *et al.*, 2008), good and bad. Because there are decisive variations in the political cultures of different societies,

cultural relativists contend that the generalisation of human nature from the universalism perspective is not convincing (Motala, 1989). Cultural relativism argues that there are no universal human moral codes and that the diversity of philosophies that exists infer that human rights can be understood differently (Donnelly, 1989; Steiner *et al.*, 2008).

The acknowledgement of cultural variances in perspective and values is not the core subject of the theory of relativism. Rather, it is the specific ways in which appraisals or judgements are made (Lakatos, 2018). In fact, some argue that rights only exist when cultures accept them as such (Rorty, 1993; Lakatos, 2018). Radical cultural relativism considers that culture is the only source for a moral right or rule (Lakatos, 2018). Robust cultural relativism is enthusiastic to admit the universal claim of core basic rights but permits differences in relation to most of what are understood as the extra rights (Lakatos, 2018).

Mentioning Ruth Benedict (1943), Pawel Zygadło (2018) notes that every culture has a consistent pattern of thought and action, and, hence, culture is the result of human creativity. On the other hand, as communities create a culture, that culture shapes the way of life and how people observe and experience the world around them – which means that culture is an exclusive invention of a sole selection (Zygadło, 2018).

However, others contemplate both understandings – universalism and cultural relativism – and provide an intermediate ground that assists the accommodation of various societal ways of life, while at the same time proclaiming certain parts of the universality of human rights (Tubor, 2019). In his discourse about human rights, Rorty does not object to the general concept of universal human rights (Slye, 1994). Disapproving of the metaphysical review that inspires much of the discussion about the content of international human rights norms, Rorty offers an alternative approach to create those norms (Slye, 1994). Sentimentality and the guidance of emotions were noted by Rorty as key to a human rights culture (Rorty, 1993). For Rorty (1993) the existence of human rights is dependent on a culture that recognises human rights as rights.

Study results

This section presents the main findings of the study. There are four themes that emerged from the explorative analysis: (i) an overview of sites where people experienced massacres; (ii) experience of egregious violence and expressions of 'we' and 'them' in relation to Amhara-Tigray and Eritrea-Tigray identifications

Places where massacres were committed

The killing of civilians happened throughout the region during the Tigray war. Massacres of civilians took place in Aksum Town, Debre-Abay in North Western Tigray, Mariam Degelat, Abune-Yemaeta in rural Hawzen, Hitsats in Asgede District, Bora-Selewa and Chercher in Southern Tigray, Mahbere-Dego in Central Tigray, Edaga-Arbi Town and Erob woreda in Eastern Tigray, and Mai-kadra, among other places (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

One of the resource persons later participated in the documentation of the mass killings that occurred in Tigray throughout the war and stated that with different forms of killing and a varied number of people killed ranging from 4 people to nearly 1,000 people, the towns, villages, and districts in which the massacres happened include: Abune Yemaeta village, Adi Fetaw, Adigrat, Adwa, Adi Daero, Aksum, Azeba, Adi Hageray, Bora, Slawa, Chellena, Debre Abay, Dongolat, Edaga Arbi, Edaga Hamus, Endabaguna, Feweyni Town, Finarwa, Gheralta, Gijet, Gu'etelo, Gulomakeda, Guya, Hawzen, Humera, Erop, Kerseber, Kerseber, Mai-Kadra, Maiweyni, Mariam Dengelat, Mekelle, Nebelet, Negash, Shiraro, Tashi, Adi-Awshi (Temben), Guya, Togoga, Workeamba, Wukor Maray, Wukro, and Zalambesa (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, May 2023).

Egregious violence

During the war, countless human rights violations occurred. A health professional in Ayder Referral Hospital who supported women who had been experienced sexual violence said that it was challenging to even talk about what has happened, let alone to have experienced it (Interviewee MK05, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle,

June 2021). These acts of violence were deliberately committed, and the offending military men knew what they were doing.

A displaced woman in Northwestern Tigray said that the men verbally insulted Tigrayan girls and women, using terms such as '*tsillas*'[1] (Tigrinya: ፀላ) and 'bitch' (Interviewee SH02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021).

In Western Tigray, a woman witnessed Amharic-speaking militia opening a womb of a pregnant woman in front of 12 other women (Interviewee SH02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021). In rural areas of Asgede, an old woman lost her three sons together with other men and she had to bury them all in the compound where she resides (Interviewee SH01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021).

Aksum is one of the places that saw a mass killing of civilians, leaving people in Tigray in shock: "That kind of killing would not be imagined in the 21st century, what made it severely painful was that it was deliberately made by the so-called 'brothers' [Eritreans]" (Interviewee AK01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021).

It is also very difficult to understand a justification that would explain the kind of killing that happened at Abune-Yemaeta of Hawzen Woreda, where a mother and her 30-day-old infant were killed, together with her other three children and an additional 15 people in just less than an hour.[2] One interviewee asked why the survivors were prevented from burying relatives, so that they would not be eaten by wild animals or decay in open air (Interviewee AK02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021). In the cultural context of the northern part of Ethiopia, but also other parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, corpses should be buried.

Throughout Tigray, countless similar stories are voiced. Thousands of civilians have been brutally killed. When recounting their stories,

[1] *Tsilla* is a derogatory term to denote Tigrigna speaking people with negative connotation. 'Tsilla' refers to a 'snitch' from the time that the TPLF had power in Ethiopia.

[2] DW Television, Documentary, 31 October 2021.

the interviewees asked: "What gratification would it give someone to see a broken-hearted mother because of killing her son?" (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021). Another question was: "Why would professional military men kill women, children, and old men to simply loot their property?" (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021). The interviewee also asked: "What moral grounds would justify these horrendous acts?" (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021).

Amhara and Tigray: 'Us' and 'them'

Why did the Ethiopians, and specifically the Amhara, not stand against the atrocities committed in Tigray? In the culture of the Amhara people, callous acts such as those that took place in the Tigray war, are under normal circumstances heavily punished (Interviewee MK10, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The political competitiveness of the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups has deep historical roots. This competition, however, does not provide a foundation for the existence of ethnic-based categorizations to deal with such kind of difference. The people of Amhara and Tigray have lived in the area long before any political differences arose. Although different historical and socio-cultural factors have resulted in separate ethnic identities, this was not with the aim of gaining comparative advantages (Interviewee MK01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). There are concerns over the misinterpretation of the narrative of historical events by the Amhara in relation to the Tigrayans causing hostility among the groups (Interviewee MK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

More importantly, for the last three decades, the leadership of the Amhara region have put forward a narrative that some territory had been forcefully taken by the TPLF administration and that industries and assets of the Amhara people had been looted by the Tigray forces

during (and after) the fight against the Derg regime[3] (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). In addition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the leading party in Ethiopia since 1991, said to be dominated by TPLF, was accused of oppressing and exploiting the Amhara and the rest of Ethiopia (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). There were also clear media broadcasts and video footage that declared genocidal war on Tigrayans, referring to a majority of 95 million Ethiopians against a minority of 5 million Tigrayans, that should be stopped from taking power, a narrative which was advanced by the Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

A woman whose house was burnt, and whose husband and sister were killed in the Western Zone of Tigray said that she was not sure if the killers were really Amhara people. She was doubtful about their identity, based on knowing their culture, as she had lived with them for years (BG, case study, Shire, 25 April 2021). Another interviewee said that these violent acts committed supposedly committed by Amhara forces do not characterise the make-up of the Amhara people. (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). One explanation could be the result of the hate speeches made by the political leadership. Especially the phrase 'Tigrigna speakers' have come to have denoted a negative connotation in the mind of many Ethiopians (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

Eritrea and Tigray: 'Us' and 'them'

With regard to the perceptions between Eritrean and Tigray groups, the researcher observed in the refugee camps that Eritrean refugees in Tigray were calling the community that hosted them and the

[3] The Derg regime was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on 28 May 1991, ending the Ethiopian Civil War (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_the_Derg).

Tigrayans who served them as '*wi-egin*' (Tigrinya: ውዕጊን)[4], which has a negative connotation of inferiority.

The labels used for Tigrayans by Eritreans who were in Tigray also reflect a hierarchy. An interviewee from Mekelle stated that the Tigrayans were labelled as *'agame'* (Tigrinya: ዓጋመ)[5] by Eritreans (Interviewee MK08, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The Eritrean troops in the Tigray war were heard by people in several part of Tigray saying they would turn the Tigrayans back into the 1960s and let the people of Tigray 'drink soup' for 40 years, as they had done to Eritreans for the last 20 years (Interviewee AK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021). This signified that the Eritrean soldiers had an idea that they were avenging. In addition, the government in Eritrea blames the TPLF administration for its own failure to transform Eritrea, hence, it indoctrinates the younger generation of Eritreans to believe that TPLF and its supporters are the enemies of Eritrea (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The Eritrean troops, regardless of their age, appeared to have an understanding about Tigrayans, which justified in their minds committing such inhumane acts against them. An elderly man in Aksum reported that the military men were 'scavengers', and he in turn questioned whether they could even be considered as human (Interviewee AK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021).

Interestingly, according to one interviewee, these despicable acts, which were perpetrated against the people in Tigray by the Eritrean troops, do not reflect on the people of Eritrea (Interviewee AD02, case-study interview with Kahsay, Adigrat, April 2021). Whatever the

[4] '*Wi-egin'* is an alternative term to '*agame*' used by Eritreans to describe Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

[5] Eritreans use the derogatory term '*agame*' to describe things that are socially or physically ugly, according to Gidey Zeratsion (1999). This term has been used by Eritreans to describe Tigrayans and to label them as non-Eritreans, mostly for Tigrayans living in eastern Tigray. From the Tigray side, normally the term is used to describe people of Tigray living in and around Adigrat town.

mass perception of the people living in Tigray, they maintained that such acts would not be expected from Eritrean-born people. Those who committed these crimes are seen as extensions of the hostile regime in Eritrea, who a respondent referred to as 'deviants' from their culture (Interviewee AD02, case-study interview with Kahsay, Adigrat, April 2021). That is why "the proud Eritreans should feel ashamed of the acts of their military".[6]

Similar cultures and norms

A strong element emerging from the interviews is the perception that Amhara, Tigrayans, and Eritreans have many commonly shared aspects in their culture. The human rights violations, including the killing of civilians and sexual violence, cannot be explained by the cultures of the peoples, interviewees maintained. Particularly in the religions of the peoples, such dehumanising acts are classified as sinful and degrading, hence, forbidden. All the monotheistic religions practised in the cultures are against such malicious acts (Interviewee MK10, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). In Tigray and Eritrea, the same logic applies – humanity is valued and moral values exist to protect humanity (Interviewee MK12, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

Conflicting parties may possess distinct ethnic identities shaped by historical and structural factors. Naomi Weir (2012) argues that ethnic conflict arises from historical developments that have influenced the relationships between ethnic groups, leading to aggression and the politicisation of ethnic identities. A primary cause of severe human rights violations can be traced to the narratives surrounding Tigray, particularly towards the Amhara in Ethiopia, with accusations against Tigrayans preceding the outbreak of war. The central Ethiopian administration has equated the Tigrayans with the TPLF in the public's perception, blaming the TPLF for various national issues (Ghebrehiwet, 2021).

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[6] Dimtsi Weyane Television, documentary film titled "ንኦፐረሽን ዘምከነ ኦፐረሽን", broadcast 8 November 2021.

On the Eritrean side, sentiments fuelled by a sense of superiority over their southern 'brothers' and 'sisters' (Plaut, 2013) have contributed to harsh actions. Eritrea's leadership has fostered an identity separate from Tigrayans, despite a shared history and culture among the Tigrigna-speaking peoples before Italian colonisation (Plaut, 2013). Abbay also notes that Tigrayans on both sides of the Mereb River share a common ethnicity, history, political economy, myths, language, and religion (Abbay, 1998). However, the Italian colonisation introduced a dismissive, semi-racist attitude among Eritrean urban elites that continues today (Plaut, 2013).

Bereket Kidane supports this perspective, highlighting a significant resentment from Eritreans due to the Tigrayan leadership's refusal to honour the Algiers Agreement (Kidane, 2014). He also points out that the 1998–2001 war worsened relations between the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia, creating "undeniable hostility and animosity between the two peoples [Eritreans and Tigrayans]" (Kidane, 2014).

Human rights, as universally recognised, apply to all individuals, ensuring everyone possesses the same inalienable rights, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court in 1998, defines crimes against humanity, including various forms of violence and persecution, as outlined in Article 7(1). In addition to promoting retributive justice, the Rome Statute aims to prevent crimes from happening in the future. These definitions are meant to apply universally to all humankind. These universally recognised human rights are generally accepted in the study area's cultures. Nonetheless, the study highlights the need to strengthen education on human rights across the Horn of Africa region, particularly considering the atrocities committed and the confusion created by political narratives. Rorty's theory of human rights culture tells us that human rights are only available as rights, if there is a sentimental education that nurtures rights as universally applicable to all human beings.

To end the reflection on this, the Tigrinya proverb 'the child of fire is ash' is instructive. The proverb relates to cause and effect: actions or intense experiences often have inevitable consequences. The phrase emphasises the natural outcome of a process. It also refers to

transformation and change: fire can symbolise transformation or destruction, and ash represents what remains after the process. This could be used to illustrate how intense experiences or changes leave behind remnants or results that are different from what existed before. The proverb also associates with ephemeral nature: fire represents something vibrant, powerful, or destructive, while ash symbolises the remains after the energy has dissipated. This suggests the transient nature of life or certain situations, where something once full of life or energy eventually diminishes.

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Author's contributions

The author is solely responsible for the design and content of the research. The study is undertaken as part of a GAIC PhD fellowship.

Ethical considerations

No specific ethical clearance was requested for this research.

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

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