

“Tigray Tragedy”

Manuel João Ramos*

Introductory words

The Ethiopian territory is presently the stage of a multi-faceted war, its progress and outcomes being clouded by wide restrictions in the access to on-the-ground information. This runs against a growing feature of the present times: excess of data and easy accessibility to its sources. As with all wars, the Ethiopian conflict defies simplistic disciplinary models of explanation, and is duly wrapped in strong rhetorical stances and an unwelcome mix of propaganda and censorship. This instability is causing distressing ripples in a region marked by the fragility of state cohesion, the incompleteness of the processes of state formation, and the pervasiveness of centrifugal secession. The humanitarian crisis it induces has been reported by a number of international bodies and organisations and is to an extent recognised by internal protagonists, even if they challenge its dimension, deny responsibility, and embark in the usual blame game.

* Manuel João Ramos, Departamento de Antropologia, Centro de Estudos Internacionais (ISCTE), University Institute of Lisbon. Contact: manuel.ramos@iscte-iul.pt

As the war progresses, its underlying causes and antecedents are surfacing in a public speech marked by an ostensive rhetoric of dehumanisation of the adversary: qualifiers such as “hyenas”, “weeds”, “animals”, “virus” and “cancer”, freely expressed both by authorities and the wider public, combine with more usual insults such as “wicked”, “fascists”, “terrorists”, “bandits” and “ungodly”. Together, they foster what has already been described as a pre-genocidal state of mind. In televised public speeches, high ranking officials and other personalities call for the adversaries’ extermination and even for the erasure of their memory in Ethiopian minds; they openly call for universal recruitment of all youth above 13 years old; they justify massacres and human rights abuses perpetrated by their fighters as acceptable responses to their opponents’; calls for peace or criticism of the war are interpreted as treasonous acts and frequently met with punishment. After one year, as the country’s economy crumbles, its international standing weakens, its political life dissolves, casualties, displacement and hunger grow, the resolve to fight has clearly been strengthened, not weakened, as all sides tend to see themselves as fighting for their political and even human survival.

To refer to this conflict as one pitching political parties with distinct power bases, “ethnic” compositions, and distinct views of the essence of the Ethiopian state, and possibly energised by rival external sponsors, may be rewarding for op-eds, social media debates or televised commentaries. Wars and their occluding clashes are, as military historian John Kegan notes (quoting the French sociologist Marcel Mauss) “total social facts”. They are collective life at its most intense expression, the occurrence of which engages every dimension of a social body. As warring elites that they are, they have taken control of political life and thereby dissolved it, war being, in their minds, a justifiable extension of the politics they have acted to crush (Keegan 1994: 228, 385f.).

Having travelled and researched in Northern Ethiopia for over 20 years, I claim little knowledge of the region, its people, and its history. But it so happens that I am familiar with many of the places that are being drawn into the maelstrom that is war. It’s cognitively and emotionally difficult to make sense of the contrasted landscapes of peace and war and to find satisfying answers to the whys that raise into one’s consciousness. Despite the information and communication blackout that is, as said, an outstanding feature of this war, I have been able to maintain some form of irregular contact with friends, informants, and acquaintances from what are now opposing sides of the conflict, that enabled me to compose a fleeting series of snapshots of how the war’s corporality is viewed from varying individual eyes.

I hence started working on a selection of six testimonies, duly anonymised, to

paint a recognisably incomplete portrait of the first months of the civil war, whose starting shot was the assault on the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) Northern Command headquarters by the military wing of the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF). In TPLF's view, this was a preventive action against a long-planned military offensive by the ENDF in par with the Eritrean army and the Amhara regional forces; for the federal government, this was the last straw in an escalating confrontation pitching a flawed federalist view against a unitary conception of the state. The TPLF largely controlled Ethiopia's politics and economy from 1991 to 2018, as senior member of the de facto single party federalist system that ruled over the ten Kilils (regional states) into which the country had been divided under the post-communist constitution. In the wake of a popular rebellion centred in Oromia, the single party nominated the current prime minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, an Oromo, who proceeded to strip TPLF of its institutional hold and to dismantle the ruling federalist party (the Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF) by creating a unitary alternative (the Prosperity Party).

Contrary to all other regional parties, TPLF refused to join the new grouping and retreated to Tigray, threatening to activate a secession (that the Ethiopian federalist constitution allows). Against the general perception of Abiy Ahmed as a reformist and a peace-maker – he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2019 for ending the long-standing conflict with Eritrea –, TPLF leaders suspected his ties with the Amhara and Eritrean elites (both intent on avenging prior humiliations and loss of territory to Tigray) to be a secret retaliatory plan that would lead to its extinction. Thus, for two years all sides prepared for the three-pronged offensive by the neighbouring Amhara Kilil, the Eritrean state and the Ethiopian federal government. Abiy Ahmed's government declared TPLF a terrorist outfit and initiated a "law and order" operation, which was in fact a brutal military occupation of Tigray, critically supported by the Eritrean army, whose secret presence in Ethiopian soil was denied for months, until reports of massacres, mass rapes and targeted executions became irrefutable.

Throughout the years, in my frequent visits to Ethiopia, I sketched obsessively, and even allowed myself to publish some of my visual production in academic books and articles (see the references mentioned in bibliography). All the while, I developed an interest in the style, grammar, and symbolism inherent to the very distinct Ethiopian popular and religious iconography. Having decided that the testimonies collected would better be graphically illustrated, I contended with how best to go ahead. Wittingly running the now ever-present risk of being categorised as a cultural appropriator, I took to getting inspiration from that very coded iconography to portray the said testimonies. The reason was clear in my

mind: while using a format (let us call it a graphic essay) that is to a great extent unsuited for international academic production, I felt that in this space my argument would be better sheltered from partisan misreading. I also settled that my prime interlocutors ought to be Ethiopians, better familiarised with the style and symbolism proper to the medium, but that the narrative – both written and visual – could appeal and be taken in by a non-specialist (non-Ethiopian) public, even if some of the essay's details could pass it by. Hyenas, snakes, lions, horse-riding saints, swords, etc., are not merely decorative elements but telling markers in a rich and coded visual language.

The intention behind this choice may be seen as slightly simple-minded: given the prevalence of the above-mentioned dehumanising rhetoric that is fuelling the internecine hatred upon which the Ethiopian civil war thrives, and the related absence of the necessary empathy to tone down and eventually to resolve the conflict, I felt (perhaps naively) that if a Ferenji (a Westerner) could speak and make see the horrors of the war in a visual language that is immediately understood as shared by the warring parties, that would somehow help lay the necessary ground to an empathic mood.

To publish such an essay while a country is at war is not a glib undertaking. It was out of the question to approach an Ethiopian publisher, as this would automatically defeat the purpose of aspiring to some sort of neutrality – as there are no publishers there that can afford that status. Oblivious of the so-called cultural wars in which the U.S. academia is immersed, it crossed my mind to pitch it for an issue on graphics and anthropology that *Anthropology News*, the voice of the American Anthropological Association, was preparing in April 2021. As one of the images was deemed having the potential to trigger an “offense” from a potential reader/viewer – it very tamely depicted an instance of rape of a young Tigrayan girl by a group of soldiers – , that possible alley was closed. I gauged different possibilities – namely journals and magazines concerned with the visual arts and their intersection with social sciences – but settled on a journal of African studies that would better ensure a modicum of neutrality and would not draw the essay into the field of graphic or artistic interpretation, away from what I feel is its main message and intention.

I thus feel immensely grateful to the editors of *Stichproben* – *Vienna Journal of African Studies* for having welcomed my proposal and accepting to publish this essay in the speediest and most diligent way.

References

- Keegan, John [1994 (1993)]. *A History of Warfare*. London: Vintage Books, 228, 384-885.
- Ramos, Manuel João (2000) *Histórias Etíopes: Diário de viagem*. Lisboa: Assírio e Alvim.
- — . (2004) “Drawing the lines: The limitations of intercultural ekphrasis”. In A. I. Afonso, L. Kurti e S. Pink (eds.). *Working Images: Visual Research and Representation in Ethnography*. London: Routledge, 135-155.
- — . (2004) (with Ana Isabel Afonso) “New graphics for old stories: Representation of local memories through drawings”. In A. I. Afonso, L. Kurti e S. Pink (eds.). *Working Images: Visual Research and Representation in Ethnography*. London: Routledge, 66-83.
- — . (2009) *Traços de Viagem: Experiências remotas, locais invulgares*. Lisboa: Bertrand.
- — . (2011) “Urban Ethnography: Largo Barão de Quintela”. In Eduardo Salviza (ed.). *Urban Sketchers in Lisbon: Drawing the City*. Lisboa: Quimera, 102-110.
- — . (2015) “Stop the Academic World, I Wanna Get Off in Quai Branly. Of Sketchbooks, Museums and Anthropology”. *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia*. 4 (2), 141-178.
- — . (2016) (with Aina Azevedo) “Drawing Close: On Visual Engagements in Fieldwork, Drawing Workshops and the Anthropological Imagination”. *Visual Ethnography*. 5 (1), 135-160.
- — . (2018) “As Imagens e os Cadernos”. In Tiago Cruz (coord.). *Nós e os Cadernos I*. Faro: Centro de Investigação em Artes e Comunicação (CIAC), Universidade do Algarve, 49-62.
- — . (2018) “O Olho Cronográfico”. In Tiago Cruz (coord.). *Nós e os Cadernos II*. Faro: Centro de Investigação em Artes e Comunicação (CIAC), Universidade do Algarve, 26-42.
- — . (2018) (with Daniel Malet Calvo) “Suddenly Last Summer: How the Tourist Tsunami Hit Lisbon”. *Revista Andaluza de Antropología*. 15, 47-73.
- — . (2018) *Of Hairy Kings and Saintly Slaves: An Ethiopian Travelogue*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing.
- — . (2021) “On Graphic Intent, a Perambulation”. In N. Tatovic, , Md S. Hossain (eds). (2021). *Drawing Heritage(s)*. Évora: Universidade de Évora - UNESCO Chair in Intangible Heritage and Traditional Know-How: Linking Heritage, 45-53.

Suggested Readings

Below, is a tentative reading list on the current war in Ethiopia. The reader should be warned that, ever since the first firing shot, partisanship has been internationalised, that the views expressed in many of these articles and reports are hotly contested, and that only a few have undergone peer review.

- Abai, Mulugeta (2021). War in Tigray and Crimes of International Law. *First Light – A Publication of the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture*. (Spring issue). <http://ccvt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/First-Light-Spring-2021-1.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Abbink, Jon (2021). The Atlantic Community Mistake on Ethiopia: Counter-Productive Statements and Data-Poor Policy of the EU and the USA on the Tigray Conflict. *ASC Working Papers*, 150 / 2021 (2nd edition). Leiden: African Studies Centre - Leiden University. https://www.ascleiden.nl/sites/default/files/ascl-working_paper_150_-_2nd_edition.pdf (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Alamineh, A. S., Geremew, B. B., & Temesgen, K. A. (2021). Inquiring the Political Strategy of Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) in Post-2018 Ethiopia. *The African Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1821889X-12340048> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Amnesty International (2021). “I Don’t Know if They Realized I was a Person”: Rape and Other Sexual Violence in the Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia (Aug., 11). AFR 25/4569/2021. London: Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AFR2545692021ENGLISH.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Anns, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Ghekiere, R., Haegeman, K., Temmerman, D., Nyssen, J., (2021). Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation (Version 2.1). Ghent: Ghent University – Department of Geography. <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8722431> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Bedaso, Dedefo 2021. Human Rights Crisis in Tigray Region of Ethiopia: The Extent of International Intervention and PM Abiy Ahmed’s Denial of Humanitarian Access into the Region (June, 2). SSRN. Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati School of Law. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3858886> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Cheeseman, Nic, Woldemariam, Yohannes (2021). Ethiopia’s Perilous Propaganda War. Efforts to Control Information Are Only Hardening the Country’s Divisions (April, 8). Foreign Affairs <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-04-08/ethiopias-perilous-propaganda-war/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Costa Delfino, Cecília Luiza, Lima, Thiago Bernardo (2021). A Crise no Tigray: Origens, Implicações Regionais e Possíveis Horizontes (April, 14). *Conjuntura Internacional – Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais*. <https://pucminasconjuntura.wordpress.com/2021/04/14/a-crise-no-tigray-origens-implicacoes-regionais-e-possiveis-horizontes/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- de Waal, Alex (2021). Talking and Fighting about Self-Determination in Ethiopia (Jan., 11). *The Africa at L.S.E. Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/01/11/talking-fighting-about-self-determination-constitution-civil-war-ethiopia/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (የኢትዮጵያ ሰብዓዊ መብቶች ኮሚሽን) (2021).

- Brief Monitoring Report on the Situation of Civilians in Humera, Dansha and Bissaber (Jan., 17). Addis Ababa: E.H.R.C. <https://ehrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Brief-Monitoring-Report-Humera-Dansha-and-Bissaber-2-1.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (የኢትዮጵያ ሰብዓዊ መብቶች ኮሚሽን) (2021). Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City. Report on Preliminary Findings (March, 24). Addis Ababa: E.H.R.C. <https://ehrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Investigation-into-Grave-Human-Rights-Violations-in-Aksum-City-Report-on-Preliminary-Findings-2-1-1.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Birhane, Fikire Tinsae (2021). The Situation in Tigray and the Duty to Investigate Serious Violations in the Context of Armed Conflicts under International Law (July, 13). *Blog of the Groningen Journal of International Law*. <https://grojil.org/2021/07/13/the-situation-in-tigray-and-the-duty-to-investigate-serious-violations-in-the-context-of-armed-conflicts-under-international-law/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Forget, Michel (2021). Premières Réflexions sur une Guerre Atypique. *Revue Défense Nationale*, Hors-série 1: 96-103. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.hs01.0096> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Freweyini Hadush Kebede (2021). Human Rights: Responsibilities of States in Armed Conflicts: Case of Eritrean involvement in Ethiopia's Tigray war. Umeå: Umeå University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1567226/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- International Crisis Group (2021). Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region (Febr., 11). *Briefing N°167*. Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/167-finding-path-peace-ethiopias-tigray-region> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- International Crisis Group (2021). Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate (April, 2). *Briefing N°171*. Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopias-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Human Rights Watch (2021). Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray (Sept, 16). New York: Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- International Crisis Group (2021). Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate. *International Crisis Group - Africa Briefing*, 171 (April, 2) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopias-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- International Crisis Group (2021). Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region. *International Crisis Group - Africa Briefing*, 167 (Febr., 11). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/167-finding-path-peace-ethiopias-tigray-region> (accessed 25 October 2021).

ethiopias-tigray-region (accessed 25 October 2021).

- Nyssen, Jan, et al. From Apologies to Atrocities: How to Make Sense of Leadership Statements in Ethiopia (June, 19). *World Peace Foundation*. Sommerville, MA: Tufts University – The Fletcher School. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/06/19/from-apologies-to-atrocities-how-to-make-sense-of-leadership-statements-in-ethiopia/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Parvianen, Simo (2021). Tigray Conflict: Homework not Done by Western Countries Has Led to Wrong Policy Action (May, 18). *SPP-FI.Medium*. <https://spp-fi.medium.com/tigray-conflict-homework-not-done-by-western-countries-has-led-to-wrong-policy-action-ce54592c54bf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Quinn, J. J. , Akyol, S. (2021). Ethiopian Foreign Policy: A Weak State or a Regional Hegemon? *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 56/5, 1094-1118.
- Refaat, Mahmoud (2021). The Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray Ethiopia at its Paroxysm (June, 28). *Strategic Affairs: Peacekeeping*. Paris: The European Institute for International Law and International Relations. <https://www.eiir.eu/strategic-affairs/conflicts-areas/the-humanitarian-crisis-in-tigray-ethiopia-at-its-paroxysm/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Refaat, Mahmoud (2021). The War on Tigray: Analysis (July, 6). *Strategic Affairs: Peacekeeping*. Paris: The European Institute for International Law and International Relations. <https://www.eiir.eu/strategic-affairs/peacekeeping/the-war-on-tigray-analysis/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Tetzlaff, Rainer (2021). Aktuelle Konflikteskalation in Tigray und das 'Rätsel' Abiy Ahmed: Friedensfürst oder Warlord? In: Rainer Tetzlaff, *Vielvölkerstaat Äthiopien. Zu den historischen Ursachen von Krieg und Frieden in Äthiopien*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 7-11. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-35497-8_3 (accessed 25 October 2021).
- UNICEF (2021). *Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report*. 8 (Sept.). <https://www.unicef.org/media/109286/file/Ethiopia-Humanitarian-SitRep-September-2021.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Verjee, Aly (2021). The Crisis of Ethiopian Foreign Relations. From 'Imperfect Hegemon' to Occupied State (Aug, 24). *Accord*. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-crisis-of-ethiopian-foreign-relations/> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Ylönen, Aleksii (2021). Counting on Friends in Tigray: Internal and Regional Considerations in the Ongoing Crisis. *The HORN Bulletin*, 4, 2 (March-April). <https://horninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/HORN-Bulletin-Vol-IV-%E2%80%A2-Iss-II-%E2%80%A2-March-April-2021.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).
- Wilmot, Claire, Tveteraas, Ellen, Drew, Alexi (2021). Dueling Information Campaigns: The War Over the Narrative in Tigray (Aug. 24). Harvard: The Media Manipulation Case Book. <https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling->

information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray (accessed 25 October 2021).

Va.Aa (2021). Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict and Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed an Ethiopian Region's Economy and Food System and Are Threatening Famine (April, 6). *World Peace Foundation*. Sommerville, MA: Tufts University – The Fletcher School. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpff/files/2021/04/Starving-Tigray-report-final.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021).