

“Tigray Tragedy”: An Interview with Manuel João Ramos

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Manuel Ramos is a Portuguese anthropologist and has worked in African Studies, particularly in Horn of Africa Studies, for a long time. With his 2018 book *“Of Hairy Kings and Saintly Slaves: An Ethiopian Travelogue”*¹, he has demonstrated how to successfully combine scholarly work and a passion for drawing (Englert 2020). Published in this issue of *Stichproben*, *“Tigray Tragedy”* not only represents a critical and yet very personal examination of the events in Northern Ethiopia in November 2020, but also enables reflection on overarching issues facing African studies.

This interview was conducted on October 7th, 2021, via ZOOM. We discussed Manuel Ramos’s comic and his desire to publish something that counteracts the development of universities into market enterprises. *“Tigray Tragedy”*, however, transcends this mere will to provoke and points towards alternative ways for Africanist scholars to conceptualize and represent Africans, Africa, and all things African. This alternative holds a difficulty for those interested, as the historian Trevor Getz aptly noted:

Modern graphic histories promise to deliver the happy union of creativity and historical inquiry. Yet problems abound in this marriage. Historians, unaccustomed to using visual forms to convey information, struggle to capitalize on the potentialities of the multimodal comic form and to let the images do the work. Too many graphic histories end up with cramped, text-crowded panels and pages. Similarly, comic artists and authors are rarely equipped to use the tools and techniques that historians have developed to interrogate and reflect on the past. (Getz 2018: 1596)

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¹ This book from 2018 is the revised and extended English translation of books which have been published in Portuguese in the years 2000 and 2010.

Nonetheless, the format of the graphic essay² (or comic, or graphic history) holds a unique potential that written text alone does not possess: the aesthetic choices made by the author allow for interpretation through visualization. Visual and verbal techniques used in comics can convey complex lived realities as well as giving shape to previously neglected protagonists of color (Aldama 2020: 2). The graphic medium not only offers space for critical engagement on a consumer level, but by using handwriting as a tool to inscribe oneself into the representation; it also produces new structures for the author to inhabit and express themselves. Put differently, comic is not just about the events that are being narrated but also how we frame them, how they are situated in specific time periods, spaces and histories.

Michaela Frauwallner: You are a strong advocate of using sketches in research processes and have published methodological articles on sketching in anthropology. How did you first start combining drawing with your scholarly work?

Manuel Ramos: I always draw during field work: I write and draw, and I film and photograph. But the fact that I draw has made me think of the possibility of including graphic work in my research, not only in the field because that comes naturally, but when I write and publish. That was after my first trip to Ethiopia back in 1999, and since then I have been playing with the possibility of an interplay between graphic work and analytical production.

Frauwallner: I have read about your book “Of Hairy Kings and Saintry Slaves” and the process behind it, could you tell me more about the decisions that happen before the publication, how do you choose what to draw, and weight the balance between text and images?

Ramos: What is pleasant about graphic work is that you are doing suspended thinking, verbal thinking that is, and you let your pen or your pencil or whatever medium you use do the work for you. Somehow, I see it as a path into a more

² In this interview, the term “graphic essay” refers to a format of text combined with fixed image narratives, similar to a graphic novel, but of essay-length. The term “graphic history” is used to show the inclusion of analytical elements of a historical account in the graphic medium. All of these terms falls into the broader genre of comic, however distinguishing themselves from classic comic strips by methods of reflection and formal choices.

holistic and a more integrated way of being in the world. At the time, the decision was not so much about what I draw or why I draw when I draw, but that of how publishing drawings would impact the way I work with text. In the end, it helped change my relationship with academia.

Frauwallner: In what ways?

Ramos: I guess it is important to note that one of the unexpected effects of the 2020 pandemic for me was that I have become more introspective than before. In fact, I do not see myself going back to do field work or even engage in travelling in the near future. The pandemic helped me to deeply reassess my relation to academia. There are troubling issues in the current relation between teaching, researching, and publishing within the academic framework that have negative impact on critical thinking and debate. Currently, all debate is transformed into quotes and biometrics. Every scientific production is reduced into algorithms, a practice that I find very annoying. So, I started publishing drawings both as a way of provoking and as escaping the algorithmic empire, because you cannot, yet at least, biometricize a drawing. You can quote an article, sections of an article, a sentence, but tell me... how can you quote a drawing? You cannot. Drawings are still outside the reaches of this predatory system.

Frauwallner: And this change in your relationship with academia, how did it impact “Tigray Tragedy”?

Ramos: I was trying to find a way to relate to the reader, to promote empathy. Also, I had the feeling – that this terrible war affecting Ethiopia – it was important to engage not only with Westerners who study Ethiopia but to try to dialogue with Ethiopians. Currently, Ethiopia is in deep political, economic, and military trouble, and many of the places where I have been conducting my research are now part of the battlefield; places where I have met people, talked to them, and made friends. And this is very difficult to rationalize, I am deeply troubled by what is happening there.

I know that I cannot publish my drawings in Ethiopia presently because hate and the political division are so ingrained that what I am trying to do with my graphic essay – which is to show that there is a common language, and that this common language can be rendered through graphic and symbolic means, a language through which people may be able to see beyond their own views and overcome differences – cannot be received. This kind of endeavor is not very

popular in Ethiopia right now, because very few people can really afford to recognize commonalities. Hate rhetoric is very frightening because it is a rhetoric of dehumanization of the other, and it is now coming from all sides.

Frauwallner: About the comic and its symbolic language – the style is quite different from your previous work, which resembles free-flowing sketch work and often depicts fleeting moments and encounters. In comparison, each panel of “Tigray Tragedy” tells multiple aspects of the story and its style is “cleaner”. What was the inspiration behind this new drawing style?

Ramos: When I sketch, I know that my graphic sketches fall into a particular category. They can be easily read and interpreted because they use a particular style, they use points of perspective and icons that are immediately recognizable for the viewer who is used to Western-style sketching. In this case, I opted for something very different: I tried to purge my usual ways of drawing and all marks of my usual style, and instead find inspiration in Ethiopian iconographic style and symbolism to express the complex relation between the communal bodies themselves.

There are many instances in which Ethiopian traditional iconography is very attractive to me, and by that, I mean in terms of graphic imagery and aesthetics. It took me a long time to learn the basics of the grammar that hides underneath it. I wanted my graphics to be immediately recognizable and interpretable by Ethiopians. That being said, I am conscious that publishing the comic in a Viennese Journal is probably not the most efficient way of speaking to Ethiopians.

Frauwallner: Speaking of publishing ...

Ramos: I was informed that Anthropological News, the Journal of the American Anthropological Association, was preparing an issue on anthropology and graphics, and so I sent a pitch proposing this graphic essay. I thought that since there is a big diasporic Ethiopian community in the in the US, and despite it being an academic journal, it is sufficiently popular to reach at least the many Ethiopians in US academia.

Frauwallner: What were the particular issues of censorship your comic faced?

Ramos: One of the terrible features of this civil war in Ethiopia is evidence of mass rape. I mean, I find it difficult to understand the world’s silence in the face of credible reports that thousands of women were raped in northern Ethiopia. There is certainly some perversion in the fact that our attention concentrates on, for instance, the plight of Afghan women forced to wear a veil and close our eyes to what is happening in other parts of the world. Is it ingrained racism? I cannot really understand the choice.

Maybe this war is perceived as one where powerful states or international organizations cannot intervene, but the fact is that terrible human rights’ abuses have gone unopposed until now. That being said, one of the pictures in my graphic essay echoes an episode from the epic of the Kebra Nagast, a key narrative in Ethiopian literature. I refer to the moment when Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, meets King Solomon and, from their “union”, as the act is euphemistically called – a son is conceived. This heir to both the Israeli and Ethiopian thrones will become the first legendary Solomonic King of Ethiopia. The fact is that when you read the text, the so called “union” is an act of rape on the part of Solomon. This legend has been popularized through paintings that use a comic-like, sequential style. I drew inspiration from the depiction of that “union” to portray the rape of a young girl by a soldier. When I submitted the graphic essay, the editor of the journal wrote to me saying that it could not be published because it might trigger traumatic feelings in the reader. She instead offered me to write an essay about rape. This, for me, was total absurdity: she was proposing that instead I could write about rape, verbally depict horrible things, but I could not present a very tame graphic portrait of a “union” where the only clear sign that a rape was involved was in the verbal caption of the drawing.

Frauwallner: So, you would not be able to discuss rape in drawing, but you were allowed to discuss it in words. I find this rather interesting, considering that the genre of graphic novel and comic history is known and praised for showing violence, showing trauma, but in a sensitive and subtle way.

Ramos: I am quite happy that I can publish in a neutral country, and I tend to see Austria as a neutral country in this matter. I am not looking for recognition, popularity, or contention. But I know that if this graphic essay is included in an academic repository, hopefully one day someone in Ethiopia will read it and hopefully it will trigger some self-reflection.

I just felt that I had to do it. For myself, for my Ethiopian friends. I felt very, very

deeply about doing this graphic work. It is weird and painful and strange to be drawing horrible things, and in a way that is very distant from what I would normally draw. I could have used a style that would be more relatable to Western readers, and I know that the outcome can come across as somewhat paradoxical. The drawings are really in dialogue with Ethiopian traditional iconography, where faces tend to be emotionless. When I look at my drawings, I have a sense of strangeness, and I guess that others will feel the same, as I drew terrible things, based on very emotional testimonies, in a style that is very formal and devoid of emotion and drama.

Frauwallner: This sounds like an issue that requires some reflection.

Ramos: It does. What are we doing as anthropologists or painters in the world? Can we appropriate? Can we paint using other people's style and grammar? I find what Marcel Griaule did in Gondar very disturbing despite being also intellectually very challenging.³ I think that what happened during that moment of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition was something one must comprehend, and something anthropology needs to come to terms with. There is something that need for reflection in the graphic work that I now did.

Frauwallner: This is definitely an interesting perspective. I was going to ask you about this element of reflection in comics because there is a difference between drawing what you have to say and working with written text alone. We use "I" or there is someone speaking in traditional academic writing. In the graphic formats however, there are different spaces for the author or creator to inhabit. In "Tigray Tragedy" you depict six different perspectives and then, there is a block of text at the bottom of each page – is this your place in this graphic essay?

Ramos: In the bottom text I tried to contextualize the testimonies by presenting an explanatory narration of the events relating to the war in Ethiopia. So, in a sense, the bottom text may sound a bit like an academic voice. As to the drawings

³ This is a reference to an anecdote mentioned in Michel Leiris' *Afrique fantôme*, when the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule and his companions repainted the walls of the church of Abba Antonios in the outskirts of Gondar, in Northern Ethiopia, after having convinced the local priests of the superiority of European oil painting techniques over Ethiopian frescoes. They then proceeded to bring the original 17th century originals to Paris, where they were exposed in the Musée de l'Homme for decades, before integrating the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, in 2006.

themselves, I should say that I almost did not do any preparatory sketches. I felt that the way I was working was almost like what we conceive of a surrealist, automatic painting, in the sense that, after reading the testimonies, I let myself go and refrained from thinking while drawing. It was a self-provocation to the academic in me.

For example, in the last testimony, I made a drawing of an old man standing on one leg, holding a cross in one hand and a sword in the other, and there is another leg on the ground. I just drew it. It was only afterwards that its meaning came to me. It is not an easy image to decode if you do not know the context. You see, there is a very important relation between the cross and the sword, because they are transmutable in many Ethiopian stories and legends; also, the old one-legged man is very reminiscent of the portrait of one of the holiest Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – Tekle Haymanot, the founder of the monastery of Debre Libanos. So, I unwittingly used the image of a most revered saint, of one of the most revered scenes of the Ethiopian church painting, to express self-righteousness and hate, which, if you think about it, is quite provocative. In retrospect, we can think that this image helps understanding part of what is happening in this conflict, but in reality, there was no a reflective or analytical action involved in doing the drawing.

Frauwallner: Have you shown the graphic essay to an Ethiopian audience? Did you get the reactions you anticipated?

Ramos: Fortunately, I have very good and enlightened friends in Ethiopia. They understood what I was doing, and they did not criticize me. Quite the contrary, but I know that wouldn't be the case of the general Ethiopian public these days.

Frauwallner: What about the sources you used to document these six different stories or perspectives?

Ramos: These are first person accounts – highly anonymized, of course. In the midst of a war, not to anonymize accounts can put people in danger. I did much more than just “blur faces” in narrative terms. I mean, I tried not to give away anything that might identify someone with what is being said.

Frauwallner: I would like to hear your opinion on using graphic histories to

write history. According to you, what does the medium of the comic or graphic narratives really offer to history writing?

Ramos: To me, drawing is not that different from writing, as they share a common source: the human capacity for sequential imagery. Their source is the brain, not the outside world, as in filmic and photographic visualizations. I know this is not a common way of thinking but let me explain what I mean by mentioning a particular chapter of Edmund Leach's *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*,⁴ one of my favorite anthropological texts. Though it is a mostly forgotten book, it is a very insightful and challenging reading of the Bible. What Leach means to say, in this chapter titled "Against Genres [Are Parables Lights Set in Candlesticks or Put under a Bushel]", is that textual, visual and ritual function interrelatedly as parts of the Gospels' unity of meaning. You could say that drawing and painting are non-verbal languages, where the significant also has no signified, much like music in fact. They are complementary ways of externalizing mental imagery through graphic means.

I see non-verbal graphic practice as a stimulating path to open oneself to the possibility that images can be explanatory, can be eye-opening, can be proposals for intellectual debate. I understand this in the sense that, since anthropological production is mostly graphism of the textual kind, drawing opens up in the possibility of overcoming the semantic limitations and the imperialistic use of our language, especially when we talk about other cultures with the self-believe that all verbal and mental categories are translatable.

Frauwallner: Especially in the context of representations of Africa, this is an important issue to engage with.

Ramos: Yes, this colonial setup still exists – I would call it intellectual imperialism. I mean, not only does it still exist, but is now probably more present than ever before, since academic literacy based on a Euro-American matrix is expanding very quickly on the continent. Anthropology has, in a sense, narrowed its scope immensely, as English became the common denominator and Anglo-American syllabuses became the preferred model, everywhere in the world. Whether you are Indian, Ethiopian, or South American, whether you are Taiwanese or Vietnamese, if you want to publish in anthropology, you have to

⁴ Leach, Edmund (2011) [1983]: *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

write in English, and you have to use a highly standardized set-up that implies a low-bar intellectual, ideological and grammatical format in writing about culturally diverse people. So, this system, in a way, is much more widespread today as a tool of mental colonization than it was before. In my view, this renders anthropology quite worthless.

I know that drawings cannot change that, but at least they offer a position from where you can start a conversation about it. At least that is my opinion and my hope.

Frauwallner: The graphic medium has this potential to encourage us to start thinking about different ways to depict different stories. To depict actors that we have not seen in traditional accounts of history so far. And as you have done – quite successfully in your comic – with some of these actors sharing violence and trauma they have experienced. Is it not much more than just a conversation starter?

Ramos: Maybe it would be an opportunity to challenge and eventually change the normalized syllabuses upon which anthropological discourse is construed. I am not saying that drawing should be a required competence for an anthropologist but valuing it can be a stimulation possibility at least. Maybe the fact that the system is so concerned with writing cultures makes it impermeable to dying cultures.

Frauwallner: Is this something you would like to see change?

Ramos: I do not have much hope for the future of the university. I have more than once written about the death of university. I have this very complicated relationship with academia, but I guess it really comes from the fact that I can still afford to have freedom of speech. In a way, I am a like a dinosaur; I am one of the last people to have had a career, with a stable – tenured – position, and this is a rare privilege today. To quote Frank Zappa, academics are “only here for the money”. In a way, I am a voice from the past who can afford to be a buffon. I can be very skeptical, and very cynical and disbelieving at times. But there is a part of my life experience that is deeply intertwined with Ethiopia and Ethiopians, and before those unforgettable times and that unforgettable people my cynicism tends to crumble. That is why I felt I had to write and draw this essay.

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