

PHOTO-ESSAY

The Art Of Pedagogy

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A glimpse at the creation and desecration of educational art in Tigray, Ethiopia.



The Doctor Atakilty Primary and Middle School is located in the Tembien Region of Tigray in Northern Ethiopia. Atakilty, a medical doctor, was one of the important leaders and martyrs of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the movement that led to the end of Ethiopia's Mengistu regime and culminated in the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia under the leadership of Meles Zenawi in 1991.

In the 1990s, the school was established on the site where Dr Atakilty had been killed and since that time had become known as one of the best schools in the area, making it a school of choice for area parents and a desired workplace for teachers. Atakilty is memorialized in a statue that stands in the central courtyard of the school as well in paintings on the exterior walls of the school, in graduation cap and gown, as illustrated by the two photos that open this essay. This depiction in graduation cap and gown, unquestionably a testament to the symbolic value of education, is based on one of the most widely circulated photographs of Dr. Atakilty, which is itself a marker of the status accorded to educational achievement.

I had been to this rural school on a number of occasions in the 2000s while visiting with my husband, a relative of Dr. Atakilty, and had been moved by the students as well as the pedagogical artwork created at the school by both students and teachers. Then in January 2020, Christian Grewell and I led a group of thirteen NYU Abu-Dhabi students to the school. We were teaching an interactive media course, *Resourcefulness*,¹ and one goal of the week-long class trip was to document the tapestries that teachers had created as pedagogical tools. Many of these tapestries, painted and penned on cloth, were not only pedagogical, but also works of art in their own right.

This photo essay serves as an introduction to the school and its pedagogical artwork and is meant to inspire as well as provide a cautionary tale.²



Exterior Walls

The exterior walls of the Dr. Atakilty School were adorned with pedagogical imagery and words, as are many primary schools in Ethiopia. In the photo that opens the essay, one can see some of the botanical and science imagery that covered many walls. The photo, left, which also shows some of the students exiting a classroom, highlights Ethiopia's Ge'ez alphabet on its side wall. Below is an image from another wall of the human brain with the cerebrum, cerebellum, and brainstem labeled in Tigrinya, the local language.

Exterior walls with Ge'ez alphabet.

Brain, cerebrum, cerebellum, brain stem.



The Tapestries

Some tapestries hung in classrooms as the next image shows. The majority of the tapestries, however, were hung in a storeroom and then were borrowed by individual teachers when needed for a particular lesson. We spent days documenting the tapestries in the classrooms and storeroom and never ceased to be amazed.



Biological Sciences

Among the tapestries dedicated to the biological sciences, the human anatomy images were striking from an artistic as well as a pedagogical point of view. Had we really learned this much in primary and middle school?

The tapestries depicting the life cycle of an insect and insect morphology were also striking, as were the comparative depictions of plant and mammalian cell structures.

A detailed drawing of a microscope, a necessary tool for understanding cell structure, was also on hand, with its various parts labelled.



The ear, lungs, and heart, with structures labeled.



Plant cell structure.



Microscope.

Yet science was clearly not the only subject of importance, beyond science there were charts related to the language arts, for instance, words in Tigrinya in their verb, noun, and adjective forms.

ግላ	ሰዎ	ቅፅል
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ
ሰላላ	ሰላላተ	ሰላላ

Verb, noun, and adjective forms of common words.



Music note lengths with their English, American, and Tigrayan names.

There were also numerous charts about poetry, for instance, delineating rules of poetic structure and form. Poetry, a celebrated verbal art form with a long history in Tigray, was clearly valued at the school. When we arrived with the NYU Abu Dhabi students, some of the older Dr. Atakilty students read poetry that they had written as part of a welcoming ceremony.

In addition to poetry, music was also in evidence. Shown left is a tapestry of music note lengths with their English, American, and Tigrayan names.



Sports instruction was part of the curriculum as well. The storeroom in which the tapestries were hung was managed by the physical education instructor. He assured us that the borrowing and return of tapestries was properly accounted for in a ledger. He told us that his favorite tapestry was, in fact, the one that depicted a world standard soccer field.

IN THE END

The young students of the Dr. Atakilty School were clearly being educated, with the tapestries attesting to the efforts that were put in by the teachers, their original



creators, as well as the users of the tapestries. Desks, books, blackboards, and students' classroom activities were further indexes and demonstrations of the educational efforts.

At the time of our visit at the beginning of 2020, the school's teachers, administrators, as well as parents and other community members were in the midst of planning and fundraising for the building of a companion high school so that students could continue their studies while staying in the local community. Most of the Dr. Atakilty students discontinued school after the eighth grade because to attend ninth grade and beyond, they would have to rent a room in a town where there was a high school or travel extremely long distances each day to go to that school. We were committed to helping them develop that high school, and developed plans for creating a technology-oriented school on nearby land that had been donated by the community.

For the Tigray region in Ethiopia, however, 2020 was not an easy year. In addition to the challenges of COVID-19, and then a plague of locusts, in November of 2020 Tigray residents became the target of a genocidal war led by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Industries, hospitals, and schools were destroyed. Women and girls systematically and brutally raped. Crops purposefully decimated and homes looted by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. The Tembien region was a geographic focal point, especially in the early stages of the war, which lasted until the end of 2022 when a peace agreement between the Federal Government and the Tigray Regional Authorities was signed in Pretoria.³

While we had assumed that the Dr. Atakilty School had probably been adversely affected by the war, it was still a shock to receive photographs from the school director of what the classrooms actually looked like in 2023.



Classrooms no longer had roofs and the only thing left inside were bits of debris. The school buildings had, in fact, been used by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops as a base. Even the wood from the desks was gone, presumably used for firewood, with just the metal parts left, stacked in haphazard piles.

Nonetheless, by 2023 the school was once again in session. Before the war, about 800 students attended the school. When the school director contacted us in early summer only about half of the students had returned. By the end of summer, the number of students was back up to around 700, with the return of students and new pupils in the beginners' classes. Classes were taught outdoors with pupils sitting on the ground.

The tapestries? We did not even ask. In a way, it seemed preposterous to even think about them when so much else was destroyed and so many lives were lost. Only time will tell if they will re-appear. But it is without question time to celebrate when education and art are, in fact, what are created, valued, discussed and consumed.⁴

NOTES

1. <https://medium.com/resourcefulness>
2. Photographs were taken by the students and instructors of the NYU Abu-Dhabi class in a collective manner – cameras were traded off between hands and digital photos shared in a folder. It has become impossible to say who is the author of any one photo. The post-war photographs of the school were sent to us by the school director.
3. Byaruhangam. 'Ethiopia war in Tigray'.
4. Anonymous. 'Ethiopia's Tigray War'.

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