CHAPTER 6

Taking the Forbidden Space: Graffiti and Resistance in Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Mulumebet Zenebe

Introduction

Pietrosanti suggests that graffiti is about “taking spaces otherwise forbidden” (2010, 72), while Ferrell (1995) states that young men and women employ graffiti as a means of resisting particular constellations of political and religious authorities. In this chapter, graffiti around the University of Addis Ababa campus is studied as a form of the writers’ self-expression. In research on graffiti, the graffiti artist is seen as negotiating a myriad of conflicted relationships between seen and unseen, space and place, local and global, and quiet and loud. Graffiti has also been interpreted as having the potential to communicate the common visions of politics that the young talk about with each other, and that unite people as members of a larger community, both local and global (Truman 2010, 10). What can the silent drawings on Ethiopian university walls and tables reveal to a researcher on youth and politics?

Ajayi argues that the capacity for independent thought and expression has not been encouraged in African countries and, consequently, students in African universities pay a heavy price for free expression (Ajayi cited in Balsvik 2007, 3). In this regard, Addis Ababa University is no different from the higher education institutions of other African countries. Established in the 1950s, it is one of the oldest and largest universities in Africa yet, with regards to freedom of expression, the previous and current regimes of Ethiopia can be regarded as repressive and, as Balsvik (2007, 2) observes, “Since the universities are key state institutions, conditions for free expression even within the university campuses are highly dependent on the actions and reactions of the regimes in power.”

The repressive environment in Ethiopia encourages students to opt for hidden forms of expression. Since the establishment of the university, students have not been encouraged to write on topics like politics and religion. For example, in one of the first rounds of Addis Ababa University student papers known as UC Calls, students were encouraged to “write on any topic under the sun, except on politics and religion” (Bahru 2014, 78); pseudonyms were
a common feature of student publications, with writers using pen names such as “Temariw” (the Student), “Lelaw Temari” (the Other Student) and “Teyaqiw” (the Enquirer) (Bahru 2014, 79). Although there were changes over the years and the university made a significant contribution to the student movement in Ethiopia, students still prefer to use hidden forms of expression to air their views, especially on certain issues that are considered sensitive and controversial. Graffiti, often associated with resistance and rebellion (Nielenberg 1994), combines different linguistic and artistic forms to express messages of a personal and social nature. It is a form situated between visual and verbal expression that often reveals something about the lives, relationships and identities of those who produce it (Pietrosanti 2010, 1). With reference to Addis Ababa University, Balsvik states that “[t]he conditions for creating, practicing and developing a political culture of dialogue and openness in Addis Ababa University from the 1960s until the turn of the century were discouraging” (2007, 177), and it is mainly due to this lack of freedom that young people opt for anonymity when expressing themselves.

This chapter examines the various ways in which the youth at Addis Ababa University express their concerns through graffiti and, specifically, the lived dynamics of graffiti production in the context of legal and political power and social control. A major question that the paper explores is the type of authority the graffiti is attempting to resist, thereby invoking the larger cultural and political context in which the graffiti at the university proliferates. Peteet (1996, 155) writes that “[g]raffiti should be contextualized in sets of power relations and structures and the forms of resistance these entail”; therefore, in order to derive meaning from a particular work, it is necessary to examine the context in which the graffiti appears. Another focus of the chapter are the interactions through which writers surprise and challenge one another. In some of the graffiti, two or more writers appear to exchange words in the form of a dialogue, although, since the graffitists work in private, it is difficult to be certain whether they are one or multiple individuals. While dialogue would suggest different writers, particularly when opposing ideas are exchanged, it is possible that a single person has used the format to try to convince the reader that a conversation took place. Finally, while the chapter pays attention to the particular meanings of authority and resistance in the everyday experience of the university students, it is important to note that the graffiti artists do not present a unified voice, and not all graffiti is progressive.

The methodological framework for the examination of graffiti writing at Addis Ababa University incorporates observation and document research. The graffiti in the main campus, which has the largest number of students and hosts the major activities of the university, was collected from 2014 to 2016.