

Towards an Actionable Understanding of Polarisation:

Expanding Democracy Works Foundation's
Peace and Democratic Transitions Programme



A Research Report for
Democracy Works Foundation: Heinrich Böhmke

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01 I presented a summary of the findings of this study to the Global Forum on Polarization, hosted by the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) on 25 September 2025 in Barcelona, Spain.

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Abstract



While polarisation is often associated with societal breakdown, civil unrest, and antagonistic group formations, attempts to define its essential features remain contested. Building on Mark Freeman's (2023) eight proposed hallmarks of polarisation this study seeks evidence of these traits in everyday language. It presents a discourse analysis of 38 idiomatic expressions gathered from 20 languages, primarily from Indonesia and Southern Africa, to investigate how polarisation is understood, described, and navigated across cultures.

Combining qualitative interpretation with light-touch quantitative coding, the study finds that many linguistic expressions encode not only conceptual understandings of polarisation, but also its perceived causes, effects, and remedies. While approximately half the expressions cast polarisation or its Hallmarks in a negative light, one third frame it positively, as a socially protective or norm-preserving force. Several languages further reveal subtle lexical distinctions between kinds of 'outsiders,' indicating differentiated

social responses grounded in perceived threat, status, or conduct.

These findings suggest that linguistic worldviews on polarisation are pragmatically embedded and morally contingent. Rather than dismissing positive connotations of polarisation as reactionary, the paper argues they reflect enduring community priorities, including the maintenance of cultural boundaries, social cohesion, and moral order. By rooting its analysis in linguistic practice rather than theoretical abstraction, the study offers pragmatic insights for designing more culturally attuned de-polarisation interventions, in the Global South and beyond. At the same time, advocates of de-polarisation must reckon with the possibility that initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity, coexistence, and acceptance may themselves be perceived by certain individuals and communities not only as challenges to material interests, but as threats to entrenched moral or social orders.

Acknowledgments

This report provides a consolidated synthesis of country finding reports carried out by researchers working in South Africa and Indonesia. DWF acknowledges the research conducted by Mogale Mashiapata (South Africa), Dr Syamsul Asri, Dr Ni Wayan Radita Novi Puspitasari, and Angie Wuysang (Indonesia).

Research oversight was provided by Dr Dicky Sofjan (Graduate School of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta) and Yasmin Shapurjee (DWF).

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1. GLOSSARY

Language Expression (Literal Translation)

1. Bugis	<i>Masseddi tai bembe</i> <i>Sitettongeng</i>	'only united while still in the goat's intestines' 'mutually strengthening one's stance', 'insisting on one's stance'
2. Duri	<i>Siallang</i>	'negating each other' / 'an excluding division'
3. Mandar	<i>Sisanggung dua pattu'du'</i> <i>Bali sola</i>	'separated by two cardinal directions'. 'enemy-friend'
4. Bali	<i>Ngalih dewa ulah butha</i> <i>Nicca</i>	'they are changing the gods' / 'they behave like the devil' 'provocateur', or 'one who provokes and divides people'.
5. Java	<i>Wong iku ora jawaning blase</i> <i>Londo ireng</i> <i>Laku</i>	'People who do not behave properly' 'Black Dutch' 'long journey'
6. Batak	<i>Hala Iyun</i>	'outsiders now occupying the same area'
7. Sabu	<i>Tangipali</i> <i>Suanggi</i>	'a hired woman who cries when there is a death in her village'. 'a malevolent spirit taking the form of a ghost of a woman with a white long dress with a hole in her stomach'
8. Minahasa	<i>Sebelah aer</i>	'people from across the water or the river'.
9. Bolaang Mongondow	<i>Orang bawah</i> <i>Kaboro</i>	'people from below' 'Physically unattractive'
10. Gorontalo	<i>Bulawahu</i>	'a person who defies social norms or is stubborn' OR 'a log, tree trunk'.

11. Siau	<i>Tau selang</i> <i>Tau sira</i> <i>Caparuni</i> <i>Tau kaporo</i>	'people of different customs and religions' with know some of the language and are eminent. 'outsiders' 'messy' or 'dirty' 'outsiders who behave badly, such as being drunkards or displaying immoral conduct. '
12. isiZulu	<i>ukwehlukana okukhulu</i> <i>Indonga ziwelene</i> <i>Ukwehlukana phakathi kwabantu</i> <i>Uhlanga lwakho lwenza umehluko</i>	'extreme division'. 'The walls have come into collision.' 'division among people' 'Your race makes a difference'
13. Swahili	<i>Wametofautiana hadi kindugu</i> <i>Uhasama wa makundi</i>	'They've even disagreed as far as among family' 'Hostility between groups' or 'sectarian hostilities'.
14. Shona	<i>Kusagarisana huunza kurwisana</i> <i>Kusatenderana kwasvika kumisha nemhuri</i>	'Failure to co-exist brings conflict'. 'Conflict is no longer only political; it's between family and community members'
15. Xitsonga	<i>Nawu wa tipolotiki wu va avanyisa</i>	'Political systems or laws are drawing people apart.'
16. seTswana	<i>Disela-mmapha ga di ratane</i>	'Competitors cannot share the same space'
17. Chichewe	<i>Anthu ambiri amaopa kulankhula</i> <i>Kusiyana maganizo pakati pa anthu</i>	'many people are afraid to speak' 'differences in opinion among people'
18. Afrikaans	<i>'n huis verdeeld ...</i> <i>Die skape van die bokke skei</i> <i>Die een so dood is die ander se brood</i>	'a house divided ...' 'separating sheep from the goats.' 'the death of one is the bread of the other'
19. Nasa Yuwe	<i>P'thans wala ewmesa sxaw</i>	'dirty negative energy'
20. Latin	<i>bellum omnium contra omnes</i>	'war of all against all'

2. Introduction⁰³

In February 2024, the Ford Foundation convened civil-society organisations in Cali, Colombia, for a four-day dialogue on polarisation. Representing Democracy Works Foundation (DWF)⁰⁴, I joined delegates from diverse NPOs whose work spans peacebuilding, racial and gender justice, and social cohesion. Across this spectrum of missions, one recognition was immediate: polarisation sits at the heart of our operational challenges. As Mark Freeman (2023:1) aptly writes, it is a “hyper-problem”. This condition makes the resolution of all other problems harder, slowly eroding tolerance, political compromise, and even basic liberties.

Freeman’s paper, “First Principles: The Need for Greater Consensus on the Fundamentals of Polarisation”, framed both the depth and confusion surrounding the subject. He argued that it is time to

confront the ambiguities that cloud the concept and to move toward a shared baseline understanding.

Employing a hallmarks method, drawn from natural sciences, Freeman proposed eight characteristic traits of polarisation that together form an operational definition of the phenomenon. This approach values how ordinary usage and cultural context shape meaning, an insight crucial to this study.

The etymological analysis yielded two fundamental features. Polarisation implies **distance**, (physical, ideological, or emotional), and movement, an intensifying **centrifugal** process that widens divides under triggering stimuli. In distinguishing polarisation from its synonyms, additional traits emerged to clarify the concept’s scope. Polarisation, Freeman argues, unfolds **horizontally**, between groups and within societies, rather than vertically between rulers and ruled. It is distinguished from mere dissent or competition by its destabilising potential, its threat to the social order itself. Freeman finally settled on eight hallmarks of polarisation.

Hallmark	Description	
1	Distance	<i>a physical, ideological, or emotional separation</i>
2	Binary	<i>typically between two opposing groups</i>
3	Critical Mass	<i>with most people clustering at the poles, and few in the middle</i>
4	Centrifugal	<i>and with hostility worsening, pushing further apart</i>
5	Horizontal	<i>characterised by group vs. group conflict, not authorities vs. subordinates</i>
6	Threat	<i>the consequence being potential societal instability, split or unrest</i>
7	Othering	<i>relying on in-group vs. out-group antagonism and demonisation</i>
8	Impermanent	<i>but in a state that could change over time for better or worse</i>

⁰³ This paper is part of a Democracy Works Foundation (DWF) research project, with a grant from the Ford Foundation. The views expressed are entirely my own. Prof. Ashwin Desai, Dr. Shannon Walsh and Mark Freeman gave valuable feedback on an early draft.

⁰⁴ DWF is a southern African non-profit company focused on democracy development in the region. With headquarters in South Africa, DWF works to provide tools to develop resilient democracies. As an independent foundation, it builds and promotes ‘inclusive, equitable and peaceful consensus democracies’. It does so by ‘providing tools, platforms and content to strengthen democrats, democratic culture and democracy institutions’: <https://www.democracyworksfoundation.org>

This study adopts Freeman’s framework to ask a simple but revealing question: Do other languages encode the phenomenon of polarisation in ways that correspond to these hallmarks? The inquiry assumes that language is pragmatic and thus that communities name what they experience. If polarisation manifests “in the wild,” it should have found idiomatic expression in the tongues of those living through it. Accordingly, I collected sayings, set-phrases, idioms, and proverbs, (collectively, expressions), from 20 linguistic communities in Indonesia and Southern Africa that convey meanings akin to polarisation⁰⁵.

Rather than tracing each expression’s origin or symbolic history, this research examines how closely it maps onto Freeman’s hallmarks. From 38 expressions describing social conflict, patterns emerge that illuminate how communities perceive and interpret polarising dynamics. By grounding the analysis in lived language, the study moves beyond English-centric or highly academic narratives. It seeks to situate polarisation within the moral and emotional texture of everyday life. The aim is not only descriptive but diagnostic. I seek to reveal how linguistic framings shape attitudes toward social division and, by extension, prospects for reconciliation. Though modest in scale and with a methodology that precludes drawing sweeping conclusions, the findings may nevertheless inform the design of de-polarisation initiatives that resonate with local worldviews.

A feature of this project is the volume of unexpected information uncovered. Analysing idioms is a notoriously tricky exercise. Meaning is layered, context-bound, and often metaphorically elusive. Initially, I sought only approximate equivalents for polarisation. Instead, entire conceptual systems

surfaced. Many expressions conveyed more than division. They captured its perceived origins, trajectories, and moral valence. Some encompassed folk theories about its causes or cures. Some idioms also encode implicit theories of cause, cautionary tales of its effects, and even suggestions for remedies. What also became clear was that polarisation as expressed in everyday language is not treated solely as a condition to be lamented. For practitioners, this discovery is useful. Idioms expose how communities themselves diagnose strife, its legitimacy, and the pathways to repair. Confronted with such rich symbolism, my own professional toolkit, procedural, legalistic, stripped of ritual or metaphysics, felt curiously flat.

None of this implies that communities whose languages valorise certain hallmarks are inherently conflict-prone. Every culture contains counter-sayings that praise peace and compromise. Nor should idioms be read as fixed ideologies. As James Scott reminds us, folk culture, (songs, gossip, jokes, and proverbs), often functions as resistant discourse, expressing dissent slyly while maintaining deniability⁰⁶. Idioms that seem to endorse polarisation may therefore serve as safe outlets for anger rather than calls to hostility. Still, their content reveals much about prevailing moral frameworks: how societies justify tension, difference, or exclusion as the price of upholding a social order.

How do expressions illuminate a linguistic and moral backdrop that either rebukes or licenses polarisation? Consider, for instance, a Javanese expression roughly translated as “people who do not behave properly.” It does more than describe discord. It assigns moral cause and prescribes distance from offenders. This mirrors some of Freeman’s hallmarks, including Othering and distance. The phrase’s moral force

⁰⁵ From the Oxford Dictionary: An **idiom** is a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words. A **set phrase** is an unvarying phrase having a specific meaning, such as ‘raining cats and dogs’, or being the only context in which a word appears, for example ‘amends’ in ‘make amends’. A **proverb** and **saying** are similar the same, respectively: a short, pithy, commonly known expression which generally offers advice or wisdom; and a short, well-known pithy saying, stating a general truth or piece of advice

⁰⁶ James C Scott, (2012) <https://libcom.org/article/everyday-forms-peasant-resistance-james-c-scott>

rests on distinguishing the proper from the improper, defining community integrity through exclusion. By contrast, a Shona expression describing conflict that has “spread between families” treats division as lamentable but morally neutral. It is a condition shared, not blamed.

Across the twenty languages surveyed, 53% of expressions treat polarisation negatively. Yet roughly 34% assign it a positive valence. Either obliquely or straight-up, they endorse the (perceived) necessity of separation, threat, or Othering to preserve moral order. In these contexts, polarisation is not pathology but defence. It is a way to maintain social cohesion, protect cultural identity, or guard against perceived contamination or competition. Polarisation thus appears, at times, as a functional, even valued, feature of community resilience rather than evidence of social failure or moral deficit.

This finding challenges a comfortable orthodoxy in de-polarisation work: the assumption that polarisation is always harmful and must automatically be reduced. Freeman himself notes that cynics of polarisation theory regard it as ‘a rhetorical lever or majoritarian pretext to force unacceptable political compromises or status quo arrangements on less powerful groups; as a term to dissuade activists from using more confrontational or divisive tactics’ (2023: 13). The linguistic evidence collected here lends nuance to both sides. Certain expressions actively celebrate confrontation as an ethical duty, as a defence of internal norms against encroachment. Through a liberal-democratic lens, such sentiment registers as intolerance or chauvinism. But this framing can obscure a local logic, one where polarisation is understood not as chaos, but as moral vigilance, a refusal to dissolve difference too readily.



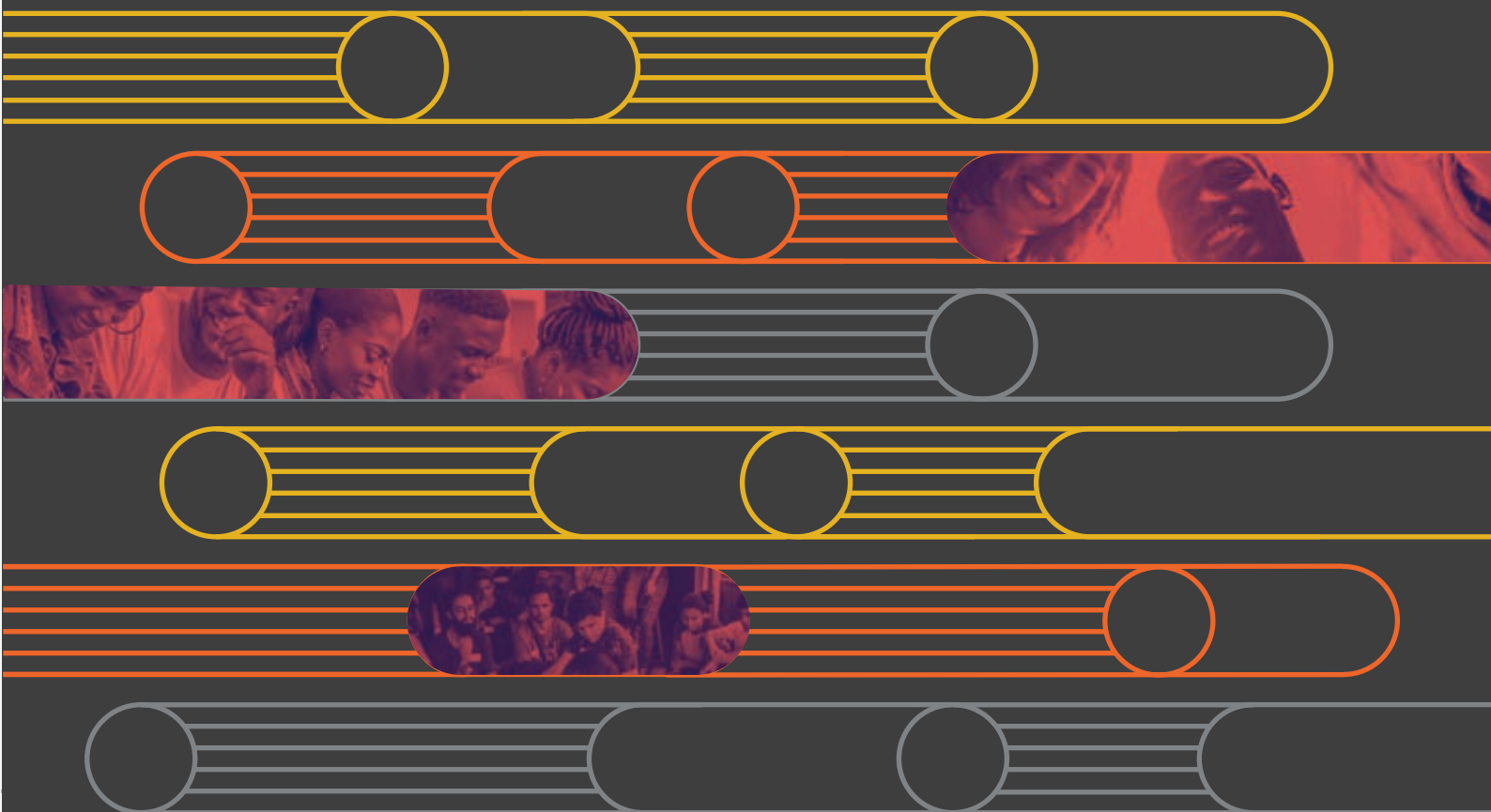
Pic. Manchester Evening News, 2 August 2025.

This has profound implications for intervention strategies. First, it demands the question: is de-polarisation always intrinsically desirable? Second, when we do attempt it, we must recognise that it involves undoing not only what people fear or despise, but sometimes also what they may cherish and wish to preserve. And this holds true far beyond the languages and regions studied here. While polarisation theory may have turned its attention to inter-group conflicts in the so-called Global South (Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Colombia, India, South Africa, Kenya, Sudan, Myanmar), ill winds pluck at rival flags in Europe and North America. The 38 expressions examined here, with their rich variation in moral orientation, some deploring polarisation, others endorsing it, offer not just description, but a diagnostic and even prescriptive lens. They point toward a need for intervention frameworks that account for the cultural legitimacy and protective logic that polarisation can hold, and which work with that reality rather than against it. In framing interventions, it turns out that the idioms can teach us quite a bit.

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3. How the Study Began

On the third day of the Cali conference in February 2024, we clambered onto buses and headed off, through farmland and forest, on a winding, two-hour trip. Our destination was the ‘indigenous reserve’ of the Nasa Paez people in the Cxhab Wala Kiwe territory. We arrived at the greenest valley and found our way down into a thatched-roofed long-house. Various speakers gave accounts of Colombia’s history, describing its own blood-soaked episodes of polarisation. Survivors revealed the scars on Colombian society of racial and gender inequity, narco-terrorism, imperialism, vigilantism, and a host of home-grown conflicts.



During a lull in proceedings, I asked a translator, Alejandro Reyes Dupont, to join me in seeking out the leader of our hosts. We made our way across a creaky bamboo bridge, climbed steps hewn into the hillside, between flags drooping in the humid air, until we found Mayor Wilson standing beside another communal house.

My goal: some impromptu field research to see whether the Nasa Yuwe language contained a word or idiom capturing the idea of polarisation. If a condition is real to a community, I reasoned, it likely leaves its imprint in speech. Languages encode not only what is seen but how it is understood, languages shape cultural and political experience⁰⁷. I suppose one could say that each word is a small anthropology of perception. Did the Nasa Yuwe people, I wondered, possess a linguistic vessel for the phenomenon that had drawn us all to Colombia? Or was the very notion of “polarisation” a product of modern, urban, Western sensibilities, a word belonging to the vocabulary of the Anglosphere rather than the broader experience of the world’s communities?

Alejandro, whose lineage of linguists and translators gave him a quiet authority, proved indispensable. After customary greetings, we explained, through patient triangulation between Nasa Yuwe, Spanish, and English, what we meant by polarisation: what it was and what it was not. Mayor Wilson listened, brow furrowed, as we described Freeman’s “hallmarks” one by one. The process resembled building a Tower (hopefully not of Babel) out of sheer goodwill, tentative and sometimes comic in its near-mis-understandings.

Mayor Wilson offered several possibilities, but most were literal translations of the terms we introduced, not expressions used in everyday speech. For instance, an early contender, ‘Jxu’ tethaw napa Phywe unuxthaw’, actually meant ‘we are separating but still talking to each other’. This was not a concept in everyday use. It was simply the **centrifugal Hallmark** roughly translated from Spanish into Nasa Yuwe. We realised we had been chasing our own definitions rather than searching for theirs.

⁰⁷ Lucy, J.A. (1997). Linguistic Relativity. In: Annual Review of Anthropology, 26: 294.

As the afternoon waned, we ambled further uphill, where community members sold woven goods and medicines beneath palm awnings. There, Mayor Wilson paused, then observed almost casually that, while his language might not name polarisation itself, it had a phrase for the true cause of trouble in any village. “But perhaps that’s not what you’re after,” he added gently. I insisted that it was precisely what we were after. He smiled. “Then the phrase,” he said, “is **P’thans wala ewmesa sxaw.**”

Dirty negative energy.

The simplicity of it lingered. The concept was to be found in the name of its cause. On the bus back to Cali, the phrase reverberated in my mind, at once moral, spiritual, and diagnostic. It suggested that social rupture was perceived not as a mere clash of interests but as a contamination of the communal atmosphere. Dirty energy. Polarisation, here, was pollution. And thus it was something that demanded cleansing, perhaps even appeasements in the supernatural realm, rather than negotiation.

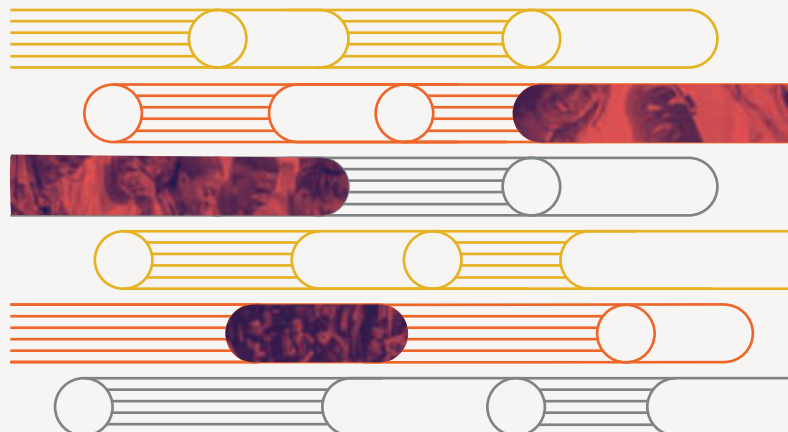
I couldn’t help but think back to the welcoming ceremony we had been given in the Cxhab Wala Kiwe settlement. In the maloca, (the vast thatched meeting house open to the elements), we had sat in a slow spiral around a fire while invocations were made to Mother Earth. The spiral, the fire, the invocation of balance: all had seemed ritualistic, even cosmological. I began to wonder whether dealing with P’thans wala ewmesa also involved rites of purification, washing hands, directional movement, collective breathing, acts that restored harmony not only among people but with the cosmos itself. Could polarisation, I mused, be as much lifted as solved, cleansed as negotiated away?

Those questions travelled back with me to Cali. On my final evening, I climbed to the San Antonio Church that overlooks the city, its white walls turning

pink in the sunset. The guidebook called it “a place where history and spirit converge.” The Greeks, I remembered, have a single word for such a space: naós. Not merely a temple, but a vessel of memory and meaning. Standing there, the essence of this study took shape. If polarisation in one world is “dirty negative energy” that must be purified, then perhaps elsewhere it appears as pride, betrayal, imbalance, or coldness. Each language does not just describe a social condition; it narrates a cosmology. My task would be to listen carefully enough to hear it.



Photo by author: San Antonio Church, Cali, Colombia.



4. Visual Communication

The Cali conference employed artists to record on flipcharts what delegates said. Usually, the artists drew spider diagrams with a few amusing doodles in between. On the last day, I asked one of the illustrators to interpret ‘dirty negative energy’ as an image. She sprung to work and in no time came up with this.

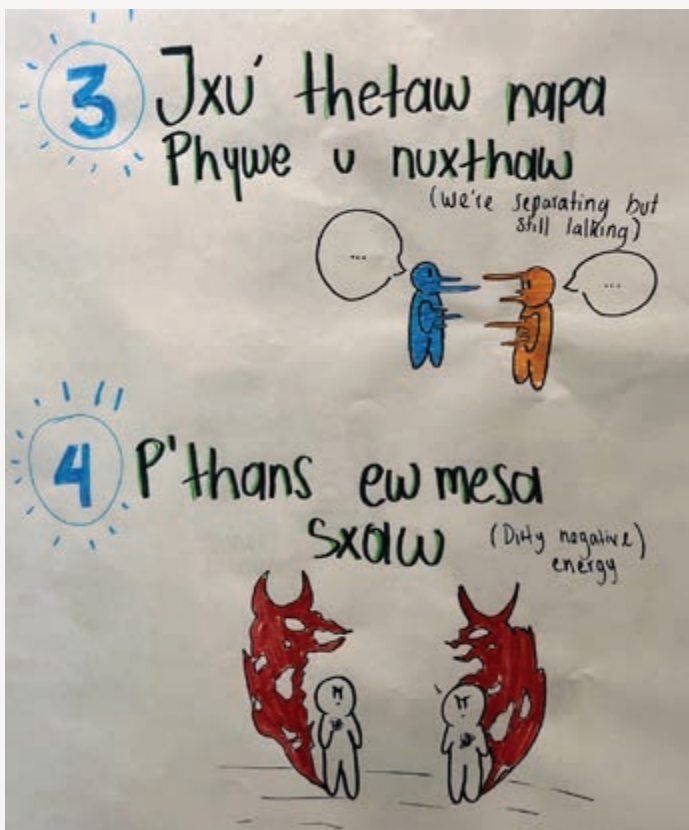


Photo by Author, flipchart, 2024

In plenary, Alejandro and I reported on our chat with Mayor Wilson, aided by the drawings. Watching the audience respond made me wonder. If one drawing could intuit and capture one linguistic group’s understanding of polarisation so well, could other drawings do the same? Could visual translation become another way to explore how cultures imagine division and reconciliation?

The idea that knowledge could be conveyed through pictures is not new. From cave walls to political cartoons, art has served as a vehicle for communal reasoning. In cross-cultural dialogue, visual grounding allows participants to communicate across linguistic boundaries by appealing to shared metaphors, light and darkness, same and different, above and below. Visual mediation or grounding⁰⁸ enables knowledge exchange by allowing people to grapple with both culturally specific and universal visual metaphors. This fosters direct reflection, debate, and co-construction of meaning across boundaries.

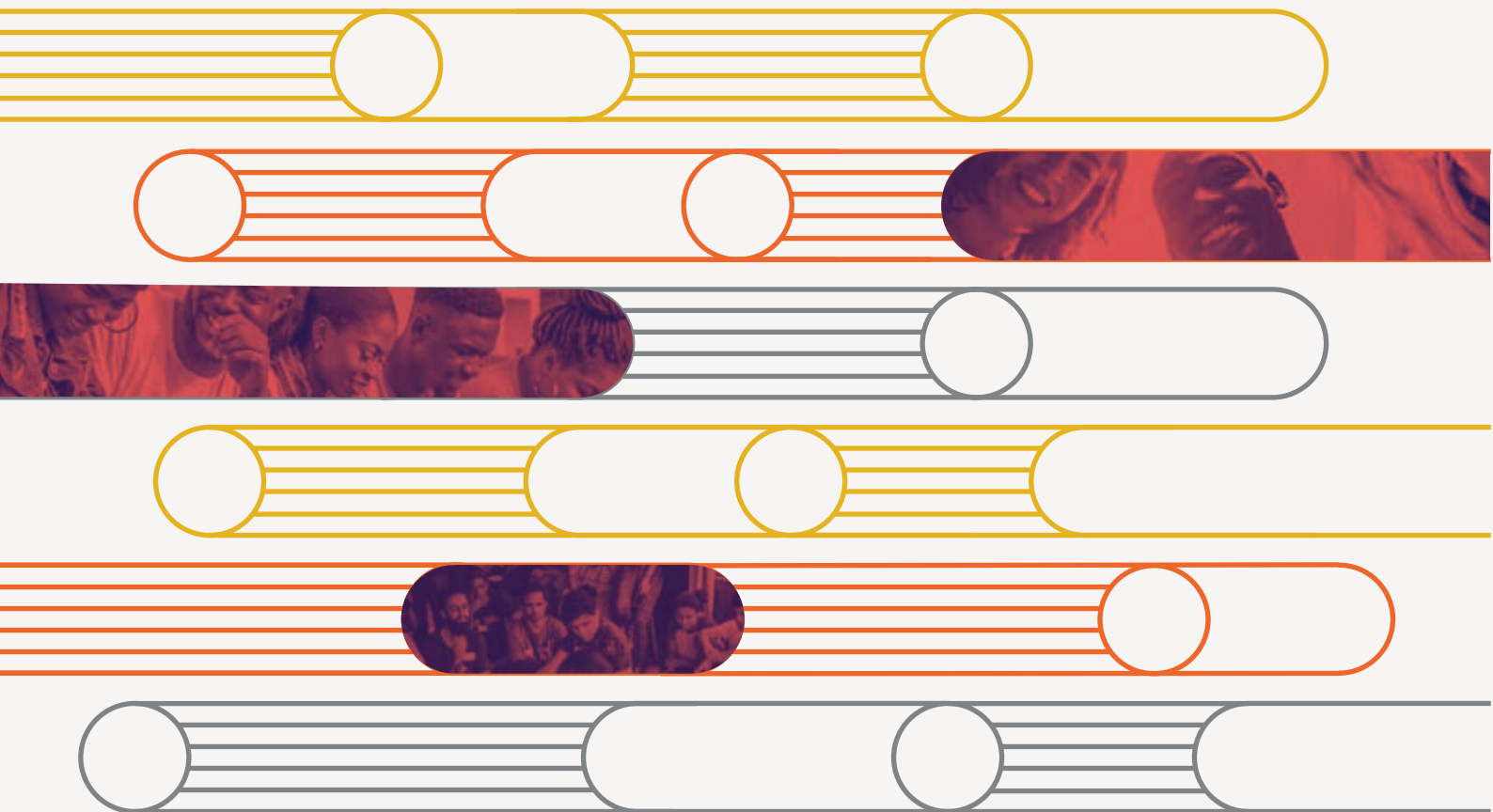
Out of this realisation grew a companion project. This is a website of visual interpretations of polarisation expressions from the twenty languages studied. Each image attempts to distil an idiom’s emotional logic, its moral charge, or its implied resolution. To create these, I turned to AI image-generation tools, marvels of computational pattern-making but with their own limits, which include lack of heart, censorship of topics deemed controversial and a tendency to cringe.

Nevertheless, with disciplined prompting, serviceable images emerged. The creative process was sobering. Many generated images arrived lacquered in sentimentality, riddled with cultural inaccuracies, or framed through a Western lens of good versus evil. Steering these engines toward ‘authenticity’ without being overly didactic proved challenging. Yet, for all of this, the results often revealed how digital systems can themselves default to dominant visual grammars which people across linguistics groups do use.

⁰⁸ See, Mohammed W, et al., (2022). *Proceedings of the Workshop on Unimodal and Multimodal Induction of Linguistic Structures* (18: 28)

This paper, in a sense, remains unfinished until those interpretations are seen, debated, and re-imagined at: <https://polarity-gallery.shirudo.solutions>, which presents a final reflection on these visuals. Polarisation is a condition of widespread fracture, yet many illustrations portray conflict at a far smaller scale: friends arguing, families divided, neighbours turning away. The exercise underscored how metaphors operate fractally. The same expression may describe a feud in a village or a schism in a nation. Technical constraints also played a role. To get an image generator to compose sprawling social tableaus proved harder than depicting intimate confrontation. And so, when an image shows but two people in conflict, I urge viewers to see in the artistic choices a deeper sociological truth.

Behind the image of a family quarrel in Zimbabwe (*Kusatenderana kwasvika kumisha nemhuri, Shona*) or the depiction of political disagreement in South Africa's Limpopo Province (*Nawu wa tipolotiki wu va avanyisa, isiTsonga*), one can sense the echo of larger conflicts. In miniature scenes of hurt and pride, the vast machinery of ideology and history is quietly refracted. The drawings remind us that polarisation begins not as an abstraction, but as an emotion. It is felt first between individuals before it hardens into the social distances within societies, nations, and tribes.



5. Methodology and its Limitations

a. The Research Team

This study investigates what words, sayings, adages and proverbs exist in 18 Indonesian and Southern Africa languages which approximate the meaning of ‘polarisation’ as theorised by Freeman. These expressions should be in everyday use⁰⁹. Although desktop research provided some answers, the idea was to canvass speakers of these languages for the context of the expressions. To this end, researchers identified knowledgeable and fluent speakers in Indonesia and South Africa, composing a convenience sample¹⁰. The participants identified as knowledgeable and fluent, including community elders, co-workers, academics, religious leaders, teachers and relatives.

Four researchers were recruited and trained in the research purpose and in interviewing techniques, namely: Syamsul Asri, Ph.D., Ni Wayan Radita Novi Puspitasari, Ph.D. and Angie Wuysang, Ph.D. in Indonesia and Mogale Mashipata in South Africa. Altogether, 11 languages and 28 expressions and phrases were collated in Indonesia and 7 languages¹¹ and 10 expressions in Southern Africa.

In Indonesia, the collation was based on in-depth interviews and idiosyncratic conversations with participants in different parts of Indonesia, mainly in Java, South Sulawesi, North Sulawesi, Bali and others.

In Southern Africa, interviews were conducted with participants in the melting-pot province of Gauteng, South Africa who spoke the languages surveyed. I composed an interview operating procedure which was translated into Bahasa Indonesia, which was used in the interviews with participants¹².

The research team then conducted semi-structured interviews with participants observing the usual ethical guidelines in academic field work. In these interviews, researchers guided participants to identify expressions that best encapsulated the Hallmarks. The languages from Indonesia are: Bugis, Duri, Mandar, Bali, Java, Batak, Sabu, Minhasa, Bolaang Mongondow, Gorontalo and Siau. The languages from Southern Africa are isiZulu¹³, Swahili, Shona, seTswana, Xitsonga, Chichewe, and Afrikaans. Additional languages are Nasa Yuwe from Colombia and Latin from the past.

⁰⁹ We did not attempt to measure frequency of use which is a significant limitation.

¹⁰ A convenience sample is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected based on their availability, accessibility, and willingness to take part, rather than through random selection. It is often used when the researcher seeks quick and practical access to a relevant group, as in this study where readily reachable fluent speakers were approached.

¹¹ I conducted one set of interviews for the Afrikaans language.

¹² Annexed as ‘B’.

¹³ A note on the names of languages

The use of prefixes like ‘isi-’ in ‘isiZulu’ or ‘se-’ in ‘seTswana’ are a linguistic feature of many Southern Bantu languages: the noun class system. In Bantu languages, including Zulu and Tswana, prefixes mark noun classes. The prefix ‘isi-’ in ‘isiZulu’ marks a class primarily used for languages in Zulu, so ‘isiZulu’ means ‘language of the Zulu people’. seTswana has the same feature.

In native contexts, speakers refer to their languages as isiZulu or seTswana. This is an endonym, or the self-designation by speakers. English has strong exonymic traditions, which tends to drop class prefixes, using just ‘Zulu’ or ‘Tswana’. It calls a language by its Anglicized name, for example ‘German’ instead of ‘Deutsch’.

In Swahili’s Case, it is known natively as ‘Kiswahili’ with ‘ki-’ being the class prefix. I have stuck with the designation used by the field researcher.

I considered using the English exonyms for Zulu, Tswana and Tsonga for consistency’s sake. However, in academic or South African institutional contexts, there is an increasing trend to prefer local names (like ‘isiZulu’), partly out of respect and accuracy, and partly because the South African constitution and language policy use these forms.

I acted as a researcher for three languages: Afrikaans¹⁴, Nasa Yuwe¹⁵ and, for fun, Latin¹⁶, bringing the number of languages to 20. All in all, 38 expressions were analysed as some languages yielded multiple expressions.

The reports received from researchers, backed up by transcripts in some instances, recorded the information they received from participants. The researchers did not act as participants or respondents in their own right.

They collected data which I interpreted, for better or worse. Although some researchers provided fascinating local knowledge and historical or geographical context, this will be used in follow-up work but is not relied upon in this study.

The finesse with which the researchers conducted the interviews is laudable. It should be remembered that, even in English, there is no settled definition of polarisation. As Freeman points out, the term is imprecisely used in the literature, a fact that prompted him to try to settle on a contradiction-free meaning distinguishing the term from similar phenomena, like conflict or sectarianism. In the absence of agreed upon traits in the academic literature, it would thus have been surprising if expressions readily existed in other languages that contained all the 8 Hallmarks. Interestingly, some idioms came quite close to covering all the bases. I have no doubt that this was in no small part due to the patience and subtlety of the research team. The way researchers were able to tease out contextual meaning from expressions that, at face value, may appear quite bland is quite remarkable.

b. Adapting the Scope

As I studied the translations provided by the researchers, two further dimensions emerged from the expressions: the type of confrontation they described and the moral orientation or valence¹⁷ they assigned to polarisation's Hallmarks.

First, with respect to the nature of social antagonism, some languages yielded an almost abstract, concept-level term approximating "polarisation." Others offered sayings or adages that gave a more general description of a conflictual state. This was anticipated. What was not anticipated was that a number of expressions clearly implied a **cause**, an **effect**, or even a **remedy** for polarisation. This made it possible to classify expressions not only as concepts or descriptions, but also as locating polarisation in causes, effects, or remedies.

Second, the expressions made it clear that distancing, threat, and Othering almost never appeared as morally neutral. They carried evaluative and emotional overtones that signalled how social division was being judged. I initially assumed these connotations would be uniformly negative and therefore did not plan to code them systematically. The translations unsettled this assumption. A substantial subset of well-Hallmarked expressions framed antagonism as warranted or even virtuous, a defence of proper order, not a social ill.

¹⁴ I received feedback from 21 fluent speakers through my Facebook account and a professional WhatsApp group.

¹⁵ Relying on the translation of Alejandro Reyes du Pont as described above

¹⁶ No native Latin speakers were interviewed. This was a desktop survey of Latin expressions in common use today, not on the streets, but in circles where Latin adages tend to be quoted, which is law and literature.

¹⁷ I use the term moral valence or moral orientation to capture not only the stance the expression takes on the Hallmarks but also the strength or charge of that stance.

My first attempt at coding therefore proved too crude. I simply tagged idioms as carrying positive or negative connotations. This failed to capture the embedded vantage point. The two expressions mentioned earlier illustrate the problem. An expression roughly equivalent to “people who behave improperly” and one meaning “disagreements that are no longer political but have spread between family” both register as negative, yet in very different ways. In the first, division is implicitly justified. Non-conformity is treated as a legitimate ground for distancing. In the second, division is lamented as a decline in valued bonds. The contrast is not just emotional but moral. It raises a deeper question: within a given expression, are polarisation’s Hallmarks being cast as necessary protections or as harms to be resisted? To answer that, a more precise framework was required, one that could illuminate the moral triggers behind why polarisation is felt as “good” or “bad,” necessary or regrettable.

To do this in a systematic way, I drew on Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), most prominently associated with Jonathan Haidt. MFT begins from the premise that human beings are innately judgemental. Our evaluations of others’ behaviour are typically not slow, deliberative, courtroom-style verdicts. Rather, they are snap, intuitive assessments, often unconscious. Haidt proposes that these intuitive moral evaluations operate along six recurrent domains¹⁸:

- Care vs. Harm
- Fairness vs. Cheating
- Loyalty vs. Betrayal
- Purity vs. Pollution
- Authority/Hierarchy vs. Subversion
- Liberty vs. Oppression

According to MFT, when others are perceived as exemplifying the first term in any pair (Care, Fairness, Loyalty, and so on), we are more inclined to affiliate, cooperate with, and trust them. When they are perceived to activate the second term (Harm, Cheating, Betrayal, etc.), we are more inclined to distance ourselves, oppose, or stigmatise them. These fast-forming evaluations are framed as an adaptive response to environments in which other people’s intentions are opaque, yet our safety and flourishing depend on reading those intentions quickly. In this view, slower, more articulate justifications for our judgements often arrive after the fact, providing socially acceptable reasons for what are, at their root, emotionally charged intuitions.

One need not endorse Haidt’s evolutionary biology or accept that his six domains are a comprehensive taxonomy of moral life to see the value of the framework. For my purposes, the six MFT domains offered a framework for evaluating the moral valence of Hallmark-bearing expressions.

One need not endorse MFT’s evolutionary claims or accept its six domains as exhaustive to see its usefulness here. The framework offers a structured way of asking: at their core, what do these idioms present as good or bad about polarisation and behaviours such as distancing, threat, and the Othering?

Under this lens, the “people behaving improperly” expression codes as one in which polarisation’s Hallmarks are broadly regarded as warranted. It signals care for the moral community, protection against perceived harm, and affirmation of hierarchy or authority over subversion. By contrast, the expression “disagreements that are no longer political but have spread between family” codes polarisation as harmful. It evokes the betrayal of a cherished institution, the family, and treats division as a loss rather than a defence. Rather than focussing on the

¹⁸ Haidt, J. 2012. *The Righteous Mind*. New York. Pantheon: 181.

less illuminating question of whether polarisation carries positive or negative connotations, an MFT analysis suggests why, within a given expression, polarisation carries those connotations.

c. Discourse Analysis

The findings of this study arise from a qualitative discourse analysis of the expressions. The first step was immersion. On an initial read-through, some responses felt disappointingly flat, especially alongside the more obviously poetic idioms. Yet repeated readings gradually changed my mind. As I revisited the material, the “plain” expressions thickened with context. Patterns and cross-references emerged, and seemingly prosaic phrases revealed layered meanings. Even in the final stages of drafting, several idioms continued to yield new nuances, forcing revisions to earlier interpretations. I suspect some idioms are still coy about what they really mean.

After familiarising myself with the whole lot, I assigned initial labels (codes) to each phrase or idiom. Working with the notes from the contributing researchers, I moved from literal translation to figurative sense, and then to pragmatic and situational function: how, when, and by whom these expressions are used in everyday interaction. The central question during this phase was what work each expression performed in its social setting. What exactly would it trying to convey?

With each return to the data, I refined the coding, merging overlapping labels and splitting overbroad ones. This iterative process was crucial. Only later, for instance, did it become clear that a Sabu expression about a mutilated female ghost pursuing Christian teachers functioned less as a description or cause of

current conflict, and more as an echo of unresolved, intergenerational trauma, a lingering effect of earlier polarisation.

Over roughly two months, I coded each expression for Freeman’s Hallmarks, noting both their presence and their deliberate absence. This distinction matters. Some idioms clearly imply a binary conflict between two groups and thus affirm the binary Hallmark. Others imagine a more diffuse field of antagonism necessarily involving multiple parties and explicitly excluding a simple two-pole configuration. Still others remain neutral on this question, compatible with both binary and multi-party conflict. The analysis therefore records not only which Hallmarks are strongly signalled, but also which are strongly ruled out or left open.

Next, I clustered the codes into broader themes and recurring discourse strategies. As outlined earlier, expressions were first classified by functional domain: whether they articulated a concept of polarisation, offered a description, identified a cause, depicted an effect, or implied a remedy. After recognising that some idioms attached positive connotations to polarisation’s Hallmarks, I then used Moral Foundations Theory to probe the moral orientation behind those connotations. Certain expressions frame the Hallmarks as harmful. For them social division is lamented, feared, or morally condemned. Others treat the same Hallmarks as justified or even virtuous. For them polarisation is necessary to defend purity, maintain hierarchy, or protect community cohesion. MFT provided a vocabulary for asking why the conflict is seen as warranted or wrongful in each case.

I excluded expressions that covered only one Hallmark. I also excluded those expressions which decidedly excluded the **threat Hallmark**¹⁹.

¹⁹ The sole exception was the remarkable term tau selang in Siau which excludes threat and Othering but is theoretically important.

I chose ‘threat’ as the veto Hallmark to ensure that the expressions reviewed in this study covered significant social discord or upheaval and were not terms reserved for trivial conflict. A few expressions fell by the wayside then.²⁰

In sum, my analysis of each expression proceeded by considering its literal translation, its figurative sense, and, most importantly, the connotations as explained by native speakers, within the contexts in which the expression is used..

Then I coded the results on three inter-related levels. First, I assessed how many of Freeman’s Hallmarks the expression actively engaged, noting also when a Hallmark was explicitly excluded or not signified at all. Second, I determined the functional domain in which the expression operated: whether it articulated a concept of polarisation, offered a description of it, identified a cause, depicted an effect, or implied a remedy. Third, I examined its moral orientation, drawing on MFT to distinguish between expressions that framed the Hallmarks as morally or emotionally negative, for example, because the resultant social division was seen as harmful, and those that assigned it positive valence, often because the Hallmarks served to preserve community ‘purity,’ cultural cohesion, or other valued norms.

Taken together, these steps enabled a more nuanced mapping of how polarisation-like states are linguistically encoded, socially situated, and morally evaluated within the expressions drawn from the twenty languages.

d. Limitations

The study used a convenience sample with researchers seeking out knowledgeable and fluent participants to probe for expressions containing Hallmarks in their mother tongue. However this sampling method has well-documented drawbacks.

Participants were chosen for their accessibility, such as community elders, colleagues, or relatives. This sampling method may not capture the diversity or breadth of viewpoints within the broader population of fluent speakers. The Indonesian expressions were noticeably folksy, perhaps pointing to a sample composed of older or more formal speakers of the languages or participants who provided answers self-consciously as custodians of the culture. Although the study allowed for slang expressions, almost no new idiomatic infusions to the languages were recorded. This is a limitation and was likely a response by researchers to my preference. For in the briefing session with researchers, I used yesteryear adages as my examples of the expressions I thought might contain Hallmarks. In any future studies, this could be avoided.

Another significant drawback of my briefing to researchers was my initial assumption that the expressions would treat polarisation as a disvalue. In my own engagement with Mayor Wilson and the Afrikaans informants I implied the same boundary: give me a word or idiom which describes this bad state of affairs where people distance themselves from others. If the research question had been stated in more neutral terms, I have the uneasy feeling that a greater number of expressions would have surfaced that code distancing, threat and Othering as warranted.

²⁰ I was particularly reluctant to lose the word N’ai from the Sabu language. It means a person with magical powers who chews betel. This sign indicates that if she chews betel and she is sweating, the person sitting behind her will suffer from stomach ailments. Certainly a problem, but not society-shattering. I also abandoned the evocative Afrikaans expression, die kloof raak al dieper (‘the ravine is deepening’) because, although it can be applied to social situations, its dominant sense of threat is in the interpersonal realm. It describes a descent into violence but the kind between the Montagues and Capulets, the Ewings and Barnes, and the Lannisters and Starks. Although, given the civilizational stakes, the latter family feud was polarisation, I suppose.

In some cases I found that the literal translation departed from the translation of an expression provided by participants. This was revealed by a light quality control comparing researcher feedback to Google Translate. In these cases, participants gave the figurative meaning of expressions and not their literal interpretation. This did not compromise output as, but for one example, the figurative meaning given by participants was readily discernible from the literal translation given by Google Translate.

A convenience sample also risks overrepresenting certain groups (such as those with higher availability or willingness to participate) and underrepresenting others, thus skewing the findings. We did not plumb various speaker populations known for their linguistic fecundity, like prisoners or students. Findings from a convenience sample thus cannot be extended to all speakers of the languages studied. It is quite possible that results may only apply to a small circle of individuals rather than the whole population.

My subjective judgement in picking researchers^{s21} and their subjective judgement in picking participants may further compound a sample bias. We may consciously or unconsciously have selected people most likely to provide certain types of responses. For example, I stressed that researchers should select participants who were advanced speakers of the language and interpreters of cultural codes. This may not reflect everyday idiomatic usage among the general population.

I can also offer no error margins as this was a non-random, impressionistic study and not a rigorous empirical one. Relatedly, different languages offered unequal numbers of expressions or levels of abstraction. For example, isiZulu offered an academic concept, and three descriptions while Xitsonga offered only an idiomatic fragment.

This certainly impacts the reliability of any comparative analysis one may be tempted to make.

As to the coding process, there is an inherently subjective layer in deciding which Hallmarks are activated, excluded, or are ambiguous. The same goes for labelling an expression as a concept, description, cause, effect or remedy. Ascribing positive, negative or neutral connotations to a Hallmark-covering expression is likewise susceptible to subjective interpretation. This drawback is amplified when further labelling the moral orientation of the expression in MFT terms.

It may also be that the strict use of Freeman's Hallmarks (with threat as a veto criterion) may result in the premature exclusion of expressions that could reveal meaningful insights into social tension, but fall short of designating existential threat. The choice of the threat Hallmark as a veto criterion is also difficult, (but not impossible) to justify. Critical mass was a close contender for this role too. I did however need to impose some mandatory Hallmark requirement on the expressions to limit the contenders.

Sticking to the eight Hallmarks may also implicitly impose a Western theoretical scaffold across culturally distinct contexts. The numbers do however show that, but for the impermanence Hallmark, all the others are either expressly activated or at least not expressly excluded in the overwhelming majority of expressions.

The least problematic limitation in my view was excluding expressions with only one Hallmark. True, this may obscure how polarisation begins or attenuates, especially in daily discourse that hints at incipient states of polarisation. It is nevertheless justifiable to concentrate analytical energies on expressions that meet more Hallmarks than just one.

21 On the sage advice of Dr Dicky Sofjan and Yasim Shapurjee

Finally, It has been pointed out to me that the coding of metaphorical expressions, especially across languages, risks cultural ‘over-interpretation’²² if not triangulated with ethnographic data. Ideally, I would go back to the participants, through the researchers to verify whether the codings are sensible and reveal what I think they do. This is another limitation the reader must unfortunately live with, hopefully to be cured later. In mitigation, the researchers did provide quite detailed notes on how participants themselves explained the expressions.

I acknowledge the value of ethnographic critiques of studies like this. They urge richer contextualisation and closer engagement with lived practice. Such perspectives rightly remind us that idioms and metaphors cannot be fully understood outside the social worlds in which they are spoken, heard, and acted upon. At the same time, both linguistic interpretation and ethnographic observation are necessarily mediated by the symbolic and conceptual frameworks we bring to them. As Kant observed, our experience of the world, whether encountered in direct observation or reported in speech, is always processed through interpretive categories.

This study, grounded in semi-structured interviews and comparative discourse analysis, therefore makes no claim to bypass mediation. Rather, it treats language itself as one of the primary arenas in which reality is navigated and constructed. Idioms are not mere decorative verbal habits. They are tightly-packed repositories of cultural scripts, moral evaluations, and tacit theories of social order. In that sense, my focus on everyday expressions is not a retreat from lived reality but a deliberate investigation into how people frame, represent, and negotiate social conflict through the tools their language gives them.

Given the methodological constraints outlined earlier, including the absence of full ethnographic triangulation, this work should be read as a study of mediated social knowledge, that is, how communities conceptualise polarisation through the terms and metaphors they themselves use. Its aim is not to escape mediation, but to reflect critically and transparently on how the discourse analysis attempted here reveals broader insights into the de-polarisation project.

²² When I code or analyse an idiom or metaphor from another language, I might infer complex emotional or normative meanings (such as inferring threat, group boundaries, or nuance in categorizing outsiders such as I do in the Siau language) that the native speakers themselves do not associate with the phrase.



6. High-Level Findings

This section provides a high-level overview of the study's key results. The first research question sought to code and count how many of Freeman's eight Hallmarks of polarisation were positively included or positively excluded in each expression. Detailed results are set out later, but at the aggregated level, the findings are summarised below.

a. Frequency of Hallmark Inclusion or Exclusion

Table 6.1 presents how many times, across all expressions, each Hallmark was explicitly included or excluded.

	Distance	Binary	Critical Mass	Centrifugal	Horizontal	Impermanent	Threat	Othering
Included	34	22	13	10	32	9	13	12
Excluded	2	1	0	0	0	10	2	3
Included %	89.5	57.9	34.2	26.3	84.2	23.7	34.2	31.6
Excluded %	5.3	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.3	5.3	7.9

Table 6.1: Hallmarks included or excluded across expressions

b. Hallmark Patterns

Distance and horizontal confrontation emerge as prominent necessary traits in expressions depicting polarisation-like states. In 58% of cases the dynamic involves only two antagonistic groups ('it takes two to tango'). By contrast, impermanence is only clearly invoked in 24% of expressions and is cancelled out in 26%. This makes impermanence, by some measure, the weakest link in the Hallmark chain when viewed through the prism of everyday language.

A notable outlier expression concerns the **threat Hallmark**, which was excluded only once in the Siau language expression: tau selang. Under

the methodology adopted, this would ordinarily disqualify an expression. However, this expression was retained because, taken together with other Siau phrases, it illuminates an important point to be fleshed out later.

The relatively modest frequencies for critical mass, centrifugal force, Othering, and threat in Table 6.1 should be interpreted with caution. Table 6.1 reflects only necessary inclusion or exclusion. It does not capture expressions that are ambiguous about a Hallmark's relevance. When non-exclusions are taken into account (see Table 6.2), the applicability of all Hallmarks to the expressions rises considerably.

	Distance	Binary	Critical Mass	Centrifugal	Horizontal	Impermanent	Threat	Othering
Included	34	22	13	10	32	9	13	12
Excluded	2	1	0	0	0	10	2	3
Neutral	2	15	25	28	6	19	23	23
Included + Neutral%	94.7%	97.4%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	73.7%	94.7%	92.1%
N0%	5.3%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	26.3%	5.3%	7.9%

Table 4.2: Included and Non-excluded Hallmarks

c. Non-Exclusions

Table 4.2 shows the frequency with which each Hallmark was not positively excluded. Here, critical mass, centrifugal force, and horizontal confrontation are never explicitly ruled out by an expression's meaning. In other words, all of the surveyed expressions could, without contradiction, be used to describe scenarios in which large segments of a society are drawn into deepening and serious conflict with each other (the critical mass, centrifugal and horizontal Hallmarks). In the overwhelming majority of cases, expressions could depict:

- distancing between two groups;
- accompanied by the threat of major social upheaval; and
- often, demonisation or de-legitimisation of the Other.

Even the impermanence Hallmark makes a decent showing in not being excluded in 73% of cases. This is although a fair number of expressions do imply intractable obstacles to reconciliation.

d. Nature and Function of Expressions

The second research question examined what kind of information an expression conveyed about the underlying social problem. Did it:

- capture a concept?
- describe a phenomenon?
- signal a cause, effect, or remedy?

Table 6.3 tallies how many times across all expressions each of these labels were applied. In some instances, an expression carried multiple labels.

Instances		Percentage	
Concept	5	Concept	8,6
Description	24	Description	41,4
Cause	18	Cause	31,0
Effect	6	Effect	10,3
Remedy	5	Remedy	8,6

Table 6.3: The Nature of expressions

Formal, abstract concepts for polarisation are rare (5.5%). Yet when they appear, they allow for cross-cultural, theory-level discussion of social phenomena closely resembling Freeman’s definition. For example, participants described the isiZulu phrase *ukwehlukana okukhulu* (‘extreme division’) as an academic term, analogous to ‘polarisation’ in English. Such a phrase has become detached from literal or figurative roots and is open to the addition of theoretical attributes.

Most expressions, however, are descriptive. They evoke concrete situations while still offering analytical insight. For instance, ‘disagreements that are no longer political but have spread between family’ (Shona) depicts tangible social breakdown yet simultaneously conveys the scope of the rupture.

Roughly one-third of expressions assign a cause, for example ‘dirty negative energy’ (Nasa Yuwe) or ‘people who do not behave properly’ (Java). The latter blends description with diagnosis. Diagnostic expressions often imply a worldview. Some exude fatalism, others carry an implicit call to action. Without even delving into sociolinguistic nuance, the difference between calling outsiders ‘people from beyond the water/river’ (Minahasa) and ‘people who behave badly, such as drunkards or those of immoral conduct’ (Siau) is stark. The first, at worst, indirectly laments lost social cohesion and homeostasis. The second implies that distancing and even confrontation is warranted.

Expressions that give polarisation a positive valence all recommend distancing but some also imply that intervention or confrontation is needed (threat or Othering). These expressions frame the Hallmarks not as disvalues but as tactical means to resolve, or reduce, the intensity of other polarisation Hallmarks. Outsiders ‘across the river’ may be perpetual but ‘drunkenness and immorality’, in theory, can be corrected or eliminated.

Expressions ascribing an effect are particularly revealing. They often refer to the legacies of historical conflict, polarisation’s ghosts from the past. Such expressions may prompt cautious optimism as the causes of trouble lie elsewhere. But history warns that old grievances reanimate, making these tensions as difficult to dissolve and present day conflagrations.

Expressions coded as remedies sometimes overlap with causes, but their distinct feature is a focus on pragmatic (if not always feasible) solutions that do not seek to justify polarisation itself. The seTswana adage ‘competitors cannot share the same space’ implies a straightforward remedy. Separate them.

e. Moral Valence Overview

The third research question addressed moral valence, (Table 4.4).

+ Valence	- Valence	None
INSTANCES		
13	20	5
PERCENTAGE		
34.2	52.6	13.2

Table 4.4: Moral valence of Hallmarks

Roughly half of all expressions frame the Hallmarks of polarisation in a negative light, as one might hope. Broadly speaking, tendencies toward distancing, division, threat, and demonisation attract social disapproval. This means that depolarisation efforts generally go with society’s moral grain. Stressing the harm, betrayal, pollution or oppression polarisation brings remains a viable discursive strategy. Yet, as the broader argument of this paper suggests, this is not always so. Language reveals that polarisation can have deep roots in values and norms communities believe worth defending, even at the cost of intensified antagonism. The proportion of positive valence is noteworthy.

The second enquiry into moral valence is to try to analyse why an expression carries the connotation it does. I have used MFT as a framework to try to answer this question. Reformulated, the question thus becomes: what moral judgements contained in an expression’s meaning tends to trigger support or opposition for polarising attitudes or behaviour? At a high level, the following emerges. Once again a single expression may trigger more than one MFT domain.

f. Measuring Moral Valence with MFT

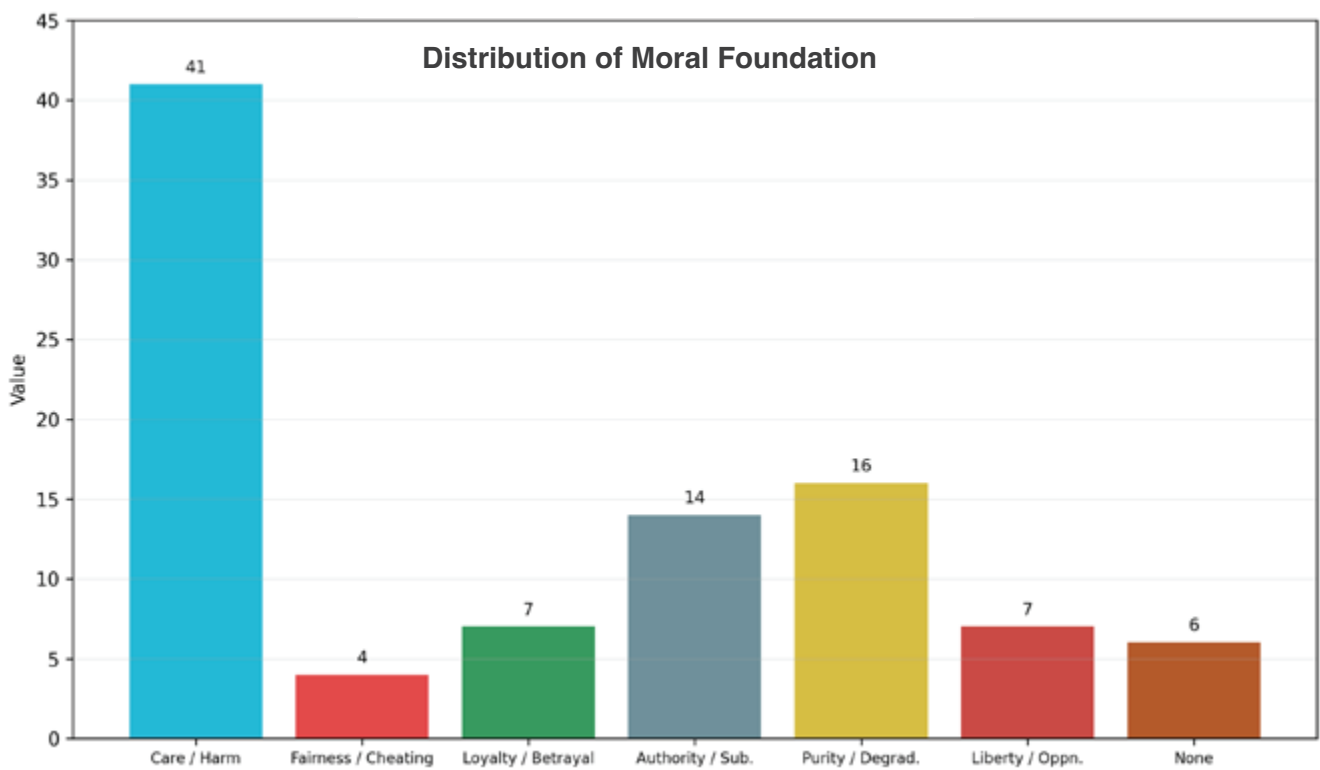
The second part of the valence enquiry asks how the moral orientation of each expression could be systematically measured. This study applied MFT as an analytic framework. Reformulated, the question becomes: what do the expressions tend to say is good or bad about polarising attitudes and behaviours?

As shown in Table 4.5, in 31% of cases polarisation was judged harmful. Yet the discourse strategies underlying some expressions also imbued Hallmarks with positive connotations, particularly in the domains of Care (15%), Purity (11%), and Authority/Hierarchy (11%).

The distribution of Moral Foundations in expressions is shown in table 4.6. This table shows that, whether polarisation is seen in a positive or negative light, in a plurality of cases the Hallmarks activate the Care / Harm domain in MFT.

Category	Instances	Percentage
Care	8	14,5
Harm	17	30,9
Fairness	2	3,6
Cheating	0	0,0
Loyalty	1	1,8
Betrayal	2	3,6
Hierarchy	6	10,9
Subversion	1	1,8
Purity	6	10,9
Pollution	3	5,5
Liberty	1	1,8
Oppression	3	5,5
None	5	9,1

Table 4.5: A MFT coding of the expressions



g. Regional Differences

Other asymmetries appear when dividing the expressions into Indonesian and Southern African languages. Of the 21 Indonesian expressions, the binary Hallmark is positively indicated 18 times or 85% of the time. The Southern African expressions only code for the binary Hallmark 4 times out of 15 or 27%. Is polarisation in Indonesia more bilateral than in Southern Africa by 58 points?

With the critical mass Hallmark, the Indonesian expressions are positively indicated 3 times out of 21 (14%). In contrast, the Southern African expressions code for critical mass 10 times out of 15 or 67%. Does polarisation in Southern Africa draw the whole of society into rival camps more readily than in Indonesia? The variance here is 53% for Southern Africa.

For the threat Hallmark, Southern African languages come out on top 8 out of 15 times (53%) while Indonesian expressions only code for threat 4 out of

21 times of (19%). The variance is 34% for Southern Africa. For the Othering Hallmark, Indonesian languages score 9 out of 21 (43%) and Southern African languages 3 out of 15 (20%); a 23% variance.

Another interesting distinction is that Indonesian expressions contain a positive valence for the Hallmarks of polarisation 11 times out of 21 or 52% of the time. Southern African languages contain a positive valence only twice out of 15 expressions, or 13%. Within the samples, Southern African expressions display a greater aversion to polarisation. Of course, the methodology does not allow us to do any more than note these differences.

This above simply highlights some of the statistical results of the coding of the 38 expressions translated from 20 languages. They suggest further study under more rigorous methods.

7. Some Observations

I offer a few observations about what this project's findings may suggest for de-polarisation practice:

Politics

De-polarisation is not only a set of techniques for dangerous moments; it is also a political project. Freeman's Hallmarks expose the infrastructure of separation, (distance, binary alignment, mobilised numbers, centrifugal pull, threat, and Othering), so that interveners can weaken the "beams and trusses" holding a divide in place. In practice, this often means challenging orientations that recruit people into hardened camps under banners that normalise distancing and demonisation. Yet it is insufficient, and sometimes counterproductive, to confront such orientations solely through moral or ideological condemnation. They are already stitched together by moral logics of their own. These include fears of outsiders, intuitions about honour, loyalty, or purity, and historically grounded memories of harm. The idioms and proverbs analysed here offer a rare window into that mass psychology²³.

This paper focuses on words and meaning. Any attempt to translate these insights into practice would fall under de-polarisation strategies that work with narrative: stories, symbols, and shared vocabularies. In many liberal settings, public education, professional life, political discourse, and indeed legal norms, narrative strategies typically extol tolerance, empathy, inclusion, equity, and progress. Those who stoke conflict or refuse reconciliation are often shamed, marginalised, or disciplined, sometimes through legal or contractual means. That repertoire has achieved important gains. But it operates within a specific moral horizon, one that assumes that those

who resist "progress" are either morally deficient or irrationally fearful.

In my own country, periodic waves of xenophobic violence flare up. These have underscored the urgency of anti-xenophobia work. Civil society campaigns have helped keep overt anti-foreigner sentiment out of mainstream politics for some time. Yet this hold is slipping. Immigration now stands to become a central electoral issue. The psychological forces pushing back against unchecked immigration, grounded in concerns about competition, security, and cultural continuity, are growing stronger than official campaigns and institutional messaging of the Simunye²⁴ type.

This research illuminates a fundamental tension in contemporary conflict resolution. While de-polarisation toolkits allow people to manage dangerous social situations, these techniques simultaneously exercise power and work within a set of normative assumptions of what is good for society. Understanding this dual nature is essential for an honest assessment of when and how de-polarisation should be applied.

The linguistic evidence suggests that in many communities, de-polarisation efforts will find a receptive audience. Many of the expressions examined cast polarisation's Hallmarks in negative terms and affirm values of togetherness, mutual recognition, and peaceful coexistence. But the remaining expressions reveal a more complex landscape. De-polarisation initiatives will at times encounter resistance rooted not in prejudice or narrow self-interest, but in moral convictions about

²³ I repurpose the term from Wilhelm Reich's prescient 1933 work, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, (1946) Orgone Institute Press.

²⁴ A social cohesion slogan meaning "We are together" or "We are one"

what must be preserved for a way of life to remain recognisable. Certain boundaries are experienced as non-negotiable. In such contexts, attempts to prevent or disrupt division may be perceived less as peace-making than as moral abdication or even an attack.

When narrative de-polarisation strategies collide with such **righteousness claims**, it can feel anti-social to urge harmony with those perceived to flaunt norms that a community sees as self-evident goods. And in a sense, this perception has force. If “peace” requires acquiescing in what is experienced as pollution, disorder, or betrayal, it may undermine precisely the forms of meaning and protection that membership in that society is supposed to provide. Pouring scorn on those who hold to local, practical wisdoms (for instance, that immigration brings competition and danger or that rapid moral change risks grievous offence, or, conversely, that police are agents of a murderously oppressive economic order) is unlikely to de-escalate anything. For critics, it may be emotionally satisfying to hoist a banner of moral purity against such attitudes. But that stance is, ironically, itself yet another move in the polarisation game.

Moral valence and its limits

The findings on moral valence are particularly instructive. Where distancing, threat, and Othering are framed as harmful, disloyal, or oppressive, de-polarisation work aligns with widely shared moral intuitions about preventing harm and resisting injustice. In these contexts, de-polarisation work reinforces rather than challenges local ethical common sense. The Nasa Yuwe term translated as dirty negative energy sees harmony as the natural setting or inclination of humans living together. It takes the intrusion of something almost supernaturally evil to disrupt this state. Where social norms embedded in language characterise polarisation as social pathology, with such a strong negative valence, this gives de-polarisation practitioners enormous moral momentum to do their work. But where the

same dynamics are experienced as necessary to maintain social order, protect vulnerable community members, or preserve sacred values, de-polarisation encounters a collective moral intuition, a *sensus communis*, that does not yield easily, if at all, to argument.

The substantial minority of expressions that assign a positive valence to polarisation reflects this reality. Consider the Javanese expression glossed as “people who do not behave properly.” Here, social distancing is not pathological but protective. It signals care for the normative community, defence against perceived moral harm, and an affirmation of legitimate authority over disorderly subversion. The same Hallmarks that elsewhere read as pathologies appear here as instruments of social hygiene.

Contemporary de-polarisation practice has concentrated heavily on three domains: facilitating material compromise (peace agreements, power-sharing, resource arrangements), encouraging observable behavioural changes (fact-checking, tolerance campaigns, legal accountability), and promoting emotional reframing (empathy exercises, narrative reconstruction, “humanising the other”). The aim is to weaken Freeman’s Hallmarks by cultivating what practitioners often call “empathetic common ground.” These approaches can be highly effective where there is a baseline consensus that deep division is itself regrettable. The expressions in this study suggest that such consensus is widespread, but not universal.

The limits of primarily rational, informational approaches become clear when we consider idioms that encode a more discriminating stance. In one Siau language example, the community distinguishes between outsiders who learn the language and contribute (*tau selang*), ordinary outsiders (*tau sire*), and outsiders who behave badly (*tau kaporo*). This taxonomy reveals a moral order in which selective exclusion is not a vice but a tool of community

protection. Arguments about overall crime statistics or macro-economic benefits miss the target when the underlying concern is behavioural compatibility and cultural continuity. Rhetorical strategies that effectively encourage openness to assimilating outsiders may be counterproductive in relation to those perceived as flouting core norms. It also packages the tau selang with the tau kaporos to the former's disadvantage. Across the dataset, several expressions justify separation from outsiders who act "improperly" or "impurely." Hostility directed at such figures is experienced less as bigotry than as virtue ²⁵.

This dynamic echoes Cicero's insistence that persuasion must align with "the language of everyday life and the usage approved by the sense of the community." When a community's idioms are saturated with suspicion of strangers, rational de-polarisation messages have limited traction. Appeals to abstract norms can unintentionally call those norms into question. We have seen versions of this in contexts where the political over-extension of empathy and diversity language has provoked electoral backlash in favour of stricter notions of formal equality, rule-bound justice, expectations of assimilation, and hard-edged cost-benefit analyses in immigration policy. In such settings, fact-checking may be dismissed as partisan manipulation, and calls for understanding may be derided as "soft" or out of touch. De-polarising voices can then become just another partisan actor.

James Scott's account of local, practical wisdom, ("vernacular knowledge"), helps explain this resistance. Communities develop their own repertoires for navigating risk, reciprocity, and status. Attempts by states, NGOs, or elites to override these repertoires with universal, standardised reasoning can be read as intrusive and illegitimate. Efforts to micromanage what Scott calls 'infra-politics'²⁶ are particularly likely to backfire. When they do, de-polarisation ceases to be a matter of persuasion and becomes a matter of policing. Social peace is then enforced through surveillance, legal pressure, or other grey zone taps on the shoulder. This may produce surface quiet while deep grievances harden.

When Wor(l)ds No Longer Overlap

The United States offers a vivid illustration of the limits of meddling with infra-politics. Jason Aldean's song and video "Try That in a Small Town" has been read as glamorising a readiness to confront perceived threats: people "looking for a fight," rioters, or those who violate local norms. At its worst, it has been seen to stereotype people of colour and contain segregationist themes. Whether or not one shares that reading, the song appears to resonate with listeners who see themselves as guardians of order in small communities. In Cullman, Alabama, a campaign that simply urges unconditional acceptance of outsiders will not work very well. Nor will anti-racism messaging pierce deeper protective instincts.

²⁵ As a thought experiment, consider a city-wide conflict between gentrifiers and long-time residents of a suddenly popular suburb. The conflict has led to increasingly ugly scenes between the young professionals and original residents. There have been court cases, threats and name calling. Hotheads in both groups have vandalised property. The mayor has called it a powder-keg.

Assume that the urban professional group is enamoured with the work of Sun Tsu and Machiavelli. Quotes about zero-sum power-plays readily fall from their lips. The original residents, in contrast, are mainly religious. The text they subscribe to urges welcoming strangers, practising good and purging evil. Up to this point, it is still possible to construct a truce which accords with the worldview of both groups. For professionals, a tactical pause; for residents, neighbourliness under moral guardrails. Extremists in either group can be shamed by mainstream norms against thuggery, violence and hate.

Now assume some catalytic events happens. A leader of the newcomers has his house burnt down. Or a yuppie speeding in his BMW knocks over a child. At this inflection point, both sides will be drawn to idioms and expressions within their milieu which best meets the moral outrage appropriate to the event. For the newcomers, those passages from Sun Tsu about moving with overwhelming speed to defeat the enemy now dominate. Similarly, religious verses about confronting evil and protecting the innocent will surface.

²⁶ Julius Gavroche, "For James Scott, 2024": <https://autonomies.org/2024/07/for-james-c-scott-1936-2024/>

At the other end of the spectrum, cities like Portland or Minneapolis are home to communities that embrace direct action, sometimes disruptive or violent, as a legitimate response to systemic injustice. When a shooting by police is widely perceived as unjustified, peaceful protest can quickly escalate into property damage and clashes with those labelled ‘fascists.’ In these contexts, appeals to a shared humanity between police and protestors may appear to erase structural grievances rather than address them. Law and order messaging will not pierce deeper protective instincts.

It is arguable that, for some constituencies, deep red and deep blue, the distance has grown so great that they are no longer merely polarised around a shared project. To be polarised is to still contest the fate of a common world. If the core values each group associates with “America” are mutually exclusive, then co-existence ceases to be a matter of finding a midpoint. It becomes a more existential question. Is any joint arrangement still possible. Beyond polarisation lies something worse. This is entrenched enmity and, if separation is impossible, the risk of civil war.

Having said that, it is perhaps heartening to realise that although the content of their moral precepts may differ in the extreme, it is built on a universal mental structure of being impelled to protect, preserve, honour and sanctify.

Drawing lines, globally

These dynamics extend beyond local politics intertwining with worldwide rise of nationalist movements around migration, generational change, and sex-based identity debates. It is a pattern echoed in several Indonesian expressions in this study where communities possess deep linguistic resources justifying protective separation.

Six out of 38 expressions examined reference problems associated with outsiders, and most of those cast polarisation’s Hallmarks in a positive light. In an age of large-scale migration, resource competition, and clashing belief systems, folk idioms that valorise drawing lines can licence antagonism. Antagonism without obvious limits. Ignoring this psycho-semantic terrain makes policy appear naïve or palliative²⁷.

The phenomenon often labelled “right-wing populism” may, at least in part, represent the reassertion of traditional moral frameworks that policy and academic elites have misunderstood or even suppressed. It can be read as a collision between a managerial project, (open markets, open borders, cosmopolitan identities), and stubborn common-sense intuitions about order, reciprocity, and continuity. The expressions in this study show that communities are not merely inventing justifications on the fly. Their languages encode long-standing theories of social protection. Dismissing such concerns as simple prejudice misses their moral structure. The seTswana expression “competitors cannot share the same space” can, in some contexts, be interpreted less as an incitement to hatred than as a sober recognition of the strains created by overlapping claims on limited resources or incompatible visions of the good life.

Equally troubling is the prospect of polarisation without the possibility of separation - what some expressions describe as interminable, inescapable conflict. The Sabu expression of a vengeful spirit illustrates how historical polarisation can create ongoing cycles of harm when geographical or social separation becomes impossible. An Afrikaans proverb that glosses as “one person’s death is another person’s bread” points to similar zero-sum logics. The isiZulu phrase that “your race makes a difference” signals a closing of ranks around racial or tribal identity.

²⁷ I rush to add that idioms may also function to release social antagonism by allowing coded gossip about the Other rather than having pent up frustration break through.

While “Balkanisation” has long been a pejorative term, the alternative of forced co-existence between deeply incompatible groupings may, in some situations, prove more destructive in the long run.

The challenge here is to find arrangements that permit what one Indonesian expression calls an “excluding division”. This freezes antagonism within known boundaries rather than its escalation toward annihilation. This could mean radical decentralisation, strengthening subnational units relative to the central state, or designing corridors of commerce and communication that allow economic interaction without demanding cultural intimacy. The fact that, thus far, “good ol’ boys” have not marched en masse into Portland, nor “antifa” into deeply conservative enclaves, suggests that some informal boundaries are already in play. Whether these can or will need to be formalised into durable political arrangements is an open question.

The application of Moral Foundations Theory in this study indicates that much de-polarisation work will resonate with expressions that treat division as harmful. That is encouraging. Yet de-polarisation must also reckon with righteousness, not only with reason or carefully crafted narratives. Events activate moral intuitions that are not easily undone by argument. Where cumulative experience appears, in a community’s eyes, to confirm stereotypes about dangerous outsiders or norm-violators, avoiding or opposing them can come to feel not just permissible but required.

Pathologising separation risks reproducing precisely the liberal “grammar of difference” that Lilith Mahmud (2025: 517) and her colleagues ask us to question. I have suggested that idioms which valorise drawing lines, (between insiders and outsiders, pure and impure, loyal and disloyal), encode vernacular theories of social protection rather than mere prejudice. Mahmud’s point deepens this. Liberalism functions as a cosmology that sets the terms for what counts as legitimate relating between persons

and groups. Within that cosmology, difference is something to be either smoothed away (“we are all the same under the skin”) or named as an intolerable threat (“extremists,” “populists”) to be neutralised.

By contrast, the expressions in this study, and the “encounters of difference” Mahmud describes, show forms of coexistence that do not aim to abolish difference at all. They normalise unstable, asymmetric, sometimes uncomfortable relations. These are the partial solidarities, guarded proximities, “non-friendships” that include and exclude in the same breath. When depolarisation work treats separation and boundary-drawing as inherently pathological, it risks erasing these alternative social arrangements. It forces conflicts back into a liberal script in which only two outcomes are intelligible: full inclusion on liberal terms or morally suspect exclusion.

An illiberal anthropology of difference, to use Mahmud’s phrase, asks us to see that many communities manage to live together through difference rather than beyond it, and that their idioms of suspicion, distance, and conditional acceptance are part of how they hold a fragile peace. The expressions in my corpus that cast polarisation’s Hallmarks in a positive light are not simply anti-social; they often resemble Maqsood’s “ephemeral” Hindu–Muslim non-friendships in Karachi. These are situational, reversible, calibrated to risk, and never fully resolved. To label such arrangements as failures of tolerance is to misrecognise them. For depolarisation practitioners, the danger is that if all, (or even most), forms of separation and guardedness are treated as symptoms to be cured, interventions will aim at producing liberal “friendship” where, in reality, the best that is locally sustainable may be something more provisional and morally ambivalent. The conditions for sustainable peace may even be morally repugnant to some: *tau sire* conditionally welcomed but people deemed *tau kaporo* thrown out of a society. The point remains. Anti-polarisation work that cannot imagine anything between warm inclusion and condemnable exclusion will systematically

misdiagnose the worlds it encounters. In doing so, it may undermine precisely those imperfect, non-liberal ways of “living with difference” that prevent antagonism from hardening into outright enmity.

As nation-states grapple with internal divisions grounded in “righteous” opposition to ethnic, religious, or political Others, effective depolarisation will increasingly depend on forms of boundary-drawing that are first ambiguous and experimental, then more firmly but creatively negotiated. These borders, which are never entirely fixed, always vulnerable to power plays and periodic renegotiation, may be closer to what polarised parties themselves desire. Partition, Balkanisation, community-enclaving may be common-sense de-escalation techniques rather than a failure of imagination. For practitioners, this demands an uncomfortable recognition that the cosmo- in cosmopolitan often operates as an imposed liberal norm, an expectation of togetherness, diversity, and the smoothing out of difference. This is something that that both parties to some serious conflicts neither seek nor experience as desirable.

Flipping the MFT Switch

Rather than dismissing concerns about cultural change or resource competition, successful interventions will need to work within existing moral frameworks. This might involve establishing clear behavioural expectations for newcomers, limiting inflows to levels communities can realistically absorb, and requiring visible commitments to local norms. The Siau distinctions between outsiders who fully participate, ordinary outsiders, and those who behave badly suggest that many communities are open to difference when it arrives with respect and reciprocity. Across much of the world, including large parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, cultural conservatism runs hot. Celebrating ‘diversity’ and ‘tolerance’ is not a terminal good in many communities outside the liberal-democratic West. Recognising this reality does not require abandoning

liberal aspirations, but it does call for more modest and context-sensitive ways of pursuing them.

In some cases, this may even entail deciding not to pursue de-polarisation in the usual sense. When affluent newcomers drive gentrification and then face fierce local opposition, it is worth asking: is it appropriate for a peacebuilding organisation to intervene primarily to ease their discomfort? Or should community-driven resistance be allowed to play out within legal limits? These are not straightforward questions. They force practitioners to confront the possibility that, in some conflicts, entrenched antagonism reflects not only misunderstanding but genuine clashes of interest and value.

In some cases, this may even extend as far as deciding not to attempt to de-polarise certain conflicts at all. When affluent gentrifiers find themselves on the wrong end of a lawsuit with displaced community members, would your nonprofit provide representation to these ‘outsiders’? If not, a secondary question arises: should your peace-making NPO intervene to mediate escalating community tensions, when doing so would benefit those whose actions largely contributed to their displacement? Imagine a situation in which yuppies are being made to feel very unwelcome after one too many rent increases. Or would you be inclined to allow community-driven opposition to reach its natural conclusion?

The challenge for societies committed to liberal values is not to renounce them, but to understand how they might be sustained in ways that honour the legitimate concerns embedded in the idioms and expressions surveyed here. If those concerns are ignored or pathologised, the resulting collision between universalist ideals and particularist loyalties risks producing precisely the “war of all against all” that both sides profess to fear.

There is an important caveat. There are times when giving expression to the values of tolerance, empathy,

and diversity in order to reduce social strife will, either self-evidently or with high probability, deliver illiberal outcomes. In that case, mediators would do well to see themselves as potential victims of one or other side, not some caste of the professionally exempt. The only good faith move at that point is to pick a camp. The next question becomes whether the community of which you are yourself now a part is prepared to defend the conditions of its own survival, even at the cost of being judged inhospitable. The alternative is to re-enact the drama of cities, institutions, companies and families throughout history that opened their doors in the name of civility only to find that what entered was not renewal but ruin.

Ritual and Supernature

The linguistic evidence suggests that effective intervention often requires engaging moral domains that sit uneasily within standard Western liberal frameworks. While concerns about care/harm and fairness/cheating account for roughly half of the moral orientations identified in the expressions, a substantial proportion foregrounds purity/pollution and authority/hierarchy. These latter domains are not marginal embellishments. They structure how many communities understand what has gone wrong and what would count as genuinely “putting things right.”

The Nasa Yuwe concept of P'thans wala ewmesa sxaw (“dirty negative energy”) is a case in point. It implies that the problem is not simply a clash of interests but a kind of moral or spiritual contamination. Resolution, in such a frame, may require purification, not merely rational negotiation or institutional reform. One thinks less of a peace treaty and more of a cleansing rite: smoke, water, gesture, and word working together to lift a heaviness that is as much metaphysical as material. Similarly, the Sabu narrative in which burying Suanggi’s bones ends the harassment suggests that addressing historical grievances may demand symbolic repair. In this case it was an act that acknowledged the dead, the

victim, showed remorse, closed a story, and ritually marked a change through a grave, alongside any material settlement that law or custom demanded.

To leave such resources untouched is to ignore a vast reservoir of meaning. Across religious traditions, practices like cleansing, sacrifice, pilgrimage and shared meals are not trivial deeds or empty ornamentation. They are technologies for re-ordering broken relationships, whether between people, communities, and, of course, the human and the divine. In Islamic thought, concepts such as **ṣulḥ** and **iṣlāḥ** frame reconciliation and social repair not only as good social policy but as sacred duties. To restore right relations is to respond to divine calls for justice and mercy. In Hindu traditions, **dharma** and **lokasaṃgraha** speak to an obligation to act in ways that “hold the world together,” maintaining not only the cosmic but also the social order through righteousness and, crucially, mutual restraint. In Buddhism, practices grounded in **mettā** (loving-kindness) and **karuṇā** (compassion) seek not just inner tranquillity but the gradual transformation of hostile relationships, inviting former antagonists into a shared field of safety and mutual regard. In Judaism, ideals such as **shalom**, **teshuvah** (return or repentance), and **tikkun olam** (the repair of the world) frame reconciliation as an active, this-worldly obligation. It involves acknowledgement of harm, restitution where possible, and the restoration of communal balance. In Christianity, traditions of **confession**, **repentance**, **forgiveness**, and **reconciliation**, rooted in the imitation of Christ, give powerful peacebuilding resources when practiced in earnest. Similarly, in many Indigenous, ancestral, and earth-centred spiritual traditions a central theme is the restoration of balance through ritual and achieving harmony in human and social relationships.

Seen through this lens, de-polarisation work that relies solely on secular tools, (such as dialogue, fact-checking or institutional design), is thin where communities experience conflict as touching the sacred. In such settings, an agreement drafted in

Careful legal language may be necessary, but it is unlikely to be sufficient. The idioms in this study hint that in some places, social peace will only be fully credible when it is also ritually enacted. This happens when bones are buried, waters shared, wrongs named before God, ancestors invoked, vows renewed, or blessings exchanged. The task for practitioners is not to instrumentalise religion, far from it. Rather it is to recognise that for many, the road out of “dirty negative energy” runs through rites that cleanse, reconcile, and “make the world right” in registers that law and policy simply cannot reach.

Five Techniques

It would be remiss not to end without drawing out a few learnings for de-polarisation practitioners working with serious conflict. Some overlap with Freeman’s suggestions, others arise more directly from the idioms and expressions examined here.

1. *Do not neglect the emotional/moral realm*

De-polarisation is not the same as mediating a commercial dispute where positions, interests, and needs define the playing field. Here, the fault lines run through people’s moral and emotional worlds. You need to understand what the conflict means to them: its cultural significance, its place in their sense of identity, honour, purity, and threat.

Immerse yourself in the vernacular knowledge of the protagonists. Listen for the idioms, jokes, asides, and proverbs that surface when they are angry, self-righteous, or contemptuous of the other side. Do not be satisfied with polite briefings that sand down the edges of indignation. A rationally elegant settlement, even one that looks favourable on paper, can be rejected if the emotional wounds are not acknowledged or if core moral intuitions are treated as embarrassing, backward, or irrelevant.

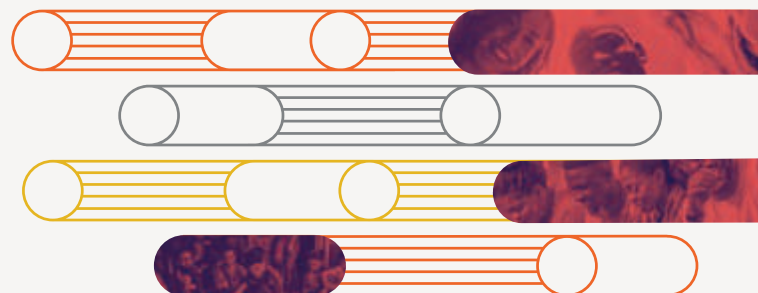
2. *Map the moral landscape, not just the issues*

Once you know what people say they want, ask what they believe they are fighting for and fighting against in moral terms. Who are they trying to protect? What harm do they fear? Who, in their eyes, is being cheated, and how? What disgusts them? What do they treat as sacred or non-negotiable? In whose realm do they believe they act: which family, tribe, nation, gang, race, boss, party, faith, or identity?

Probe who is seen as a loyal insider and who as a defector or traitor. Ask what, in their view, caused the betrayal. Clarify how the conflict maps onto their sense of liberty and oppression. Who is being “freed,” who is being “crushed,” and why one side believes history is on their side. This moral cartography will tell you far more about the durability of the conflict than a list of talking points ever could.



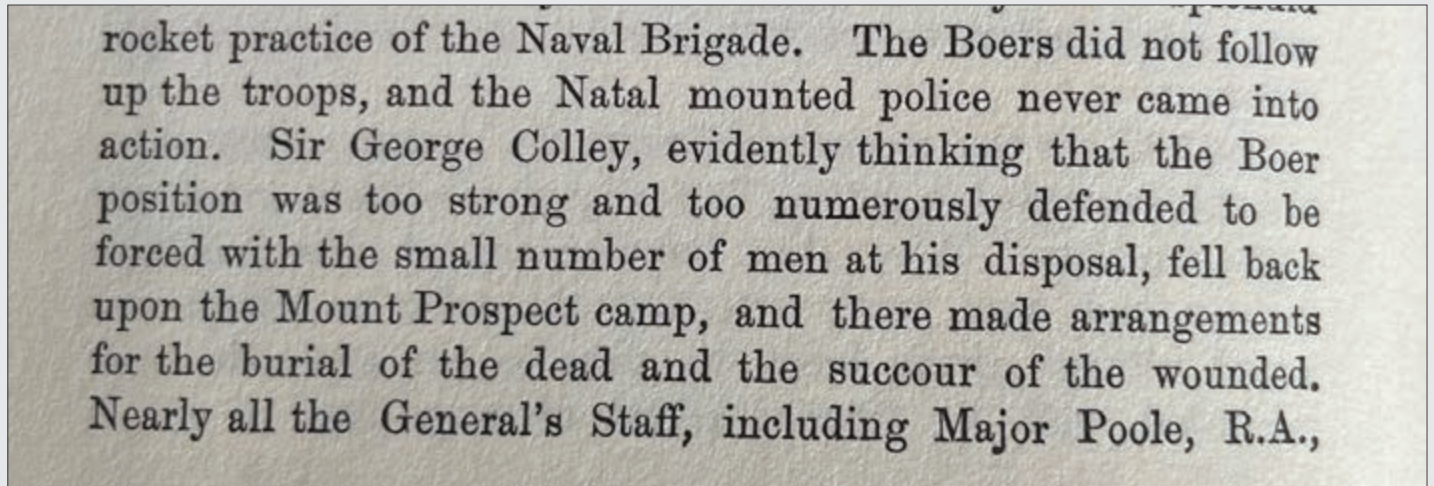
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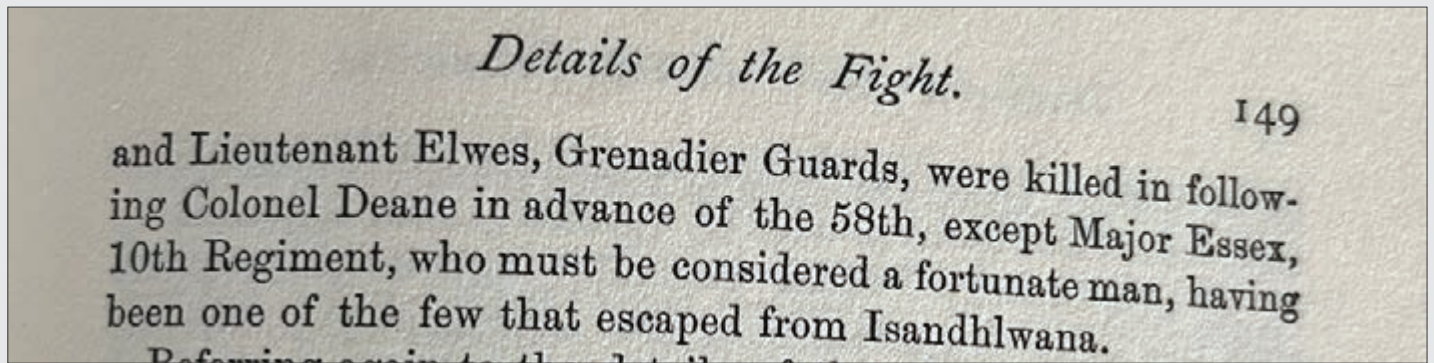
Zulu and Afrikaner

Speaking of history, here is a dispatch by CL Norris-Newham in *With the Boers in the Transvaal* (1880 – 1881). This excerpt tells of the defeat of a British regiment in a battle with the Boers at Mt

Prospect on 28 January 1881. It records the survival of an officer, Major Essex, who also miraculously survived the battle of Isandlwana. This famous battle saw the defeat of the British by the Zulu on 22 January 1879.



rocket practice of the Naval Brigade. The Boers did not follow up the troops, and the Natal mounted police never came into action. Sir George Colley, evidently thinking that the Boer position was too strong and too numerously defended to be forced with the small number of men at his disposal, fell back upon the Mount Prospect camp, and there made arrangements for the burial of the dead and the succour of the wounded. Nearly all the General's Staff, including Major Poole, R.A.,



Details of the Fight.

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and Lieutenant Elwes, Grenadier Guards, were killed in following Colonel Deane in advance of the 58th, except Major Essex, 10th Regiment, who must be considered a fortunate man, having been one of the few that escaped from Isandhlwana.

In any dispute between Afrikaner and Zulu nations, bound to be serious, the historical record contains such rich material for moral rapprochement.

3. *Discover the “common sense” of cause, effect, and remedy*

Every group carries a quiet, taken-for-granted story about what causes trouble, how it plays out, and what fixes it. That story rarely appears in formal meetings. It emerges off the record, in the kitchen, the car, the smoke break, the unguarded joke. Listen for it. **Ask yourself:** what do the cook, the driver, the young activists, and the old guard believe about who can live together and who cannot?

If the shared “common sense” is that two groups are natural enemies, no amount of whispered persuasion to the formal leadership will change much.

Conversely, if leaders are baying for confrontation but the rank-and-file intuit that there is another way out, there is space to shift the trajectory.

De-polarisation that ignores this subterranean consensus risks becoming theatrical. It will be visible and perhaps paid-for, but irrelevant.

4. *Learn to reframe, not to scold*

When faced with hard objections, treating them as moral crimes closes doors. Treat them instead as openings into a worldview you must understand and gently bend. Reframing means answering a fear in its own language while nudging it toward a more workable shape.

To the objection “we cannot trust members of that race,” you do not respond with denunciation, but with questions that complicate the picture:

- Have you ever been cheated by your own?
- What if, in all dealings with you, they always paid first?
- What if, even after controlling for cheating, you still came out ahead?
- What safeguards could we put in place that would make dealing with them tolerable to you?

To the objection “we don’t want any strangers here,” you probe the boundaries of the category:

- That obviously excludes any doctors willing to treat (y)our sick, or merchants who sell at fair prices?
- What if they followed our faith / politics, our ways, and spoke our language?
- Some of our own people live as strangers elsewhere. Should they all be forced to come back?

To the objection “those who behave improperly should be shunned,” you affirm the norm but focus on how it should be applied:

- Yes, people who disrespect (y)our customs should be challenged.
- Yes, if someone disturbs the neighbourhood at night and ignores complaints, they should be dealt with firmly.
- Yes, perhaps they should be told plainly, “this is not how one behaves in a small town / in Portland / in this community.”

Reframing accepts that people want to defend something they value, and then works to narrow, condition, or redirect that impulse to distance and Other rather than trying to erase it. It also knows when to concede that conflict is necessary to prevent broader polarisation. In the last example, timeously

and confidently communicating annoyance is an antidote to broader division not the cause of it.

5. *Work with moral foundations, not against them*

The idioms in this study show that many communities experience polarisation’s Hallmarks, (distance, boundary-setting, even hostility), as expressions of care, loyalty, fairness, or sanctity rather than as failings. De-polarisation becomes more effective when it switches moral channels rather than simply turning them off.

Where people fear outsiders, you can ask not only “how do we reduce fear?” but “what conditions would make welcoming some outsiders feel like an act of loyalty to your own”. For instance by bringing in skills, resources, or allies that strengthen the community? Where norms around purity are strong, you can ask “what would ‘clean’ forms of coexistence look like?” This would be clear rules, zones, or expectations that prevent the kind of pollution people dread? Where serious conflict has already happened, it could mean using rituals that people take seriously to purify the shared space again. Where hierarchy and honour matter, you can design processes that allow leaders to endorse de-escalation without losing face. It is not unknown for former foes to form new polities after warring with each other, perhaps to face a new common enemy. Never underestimate the need for a unifying common foe when deescalating. It’s both a trope and a narrative, older even than the Greek city states and Persia.

In short, do not try to dissolve the moral logics embedded in everyday expressions. Learn them, name them, and look for ways to redirect them. The goal is not to talk people out of caring about their own, but to help them see how, under some conditions, restraint and limited accommodation can serve precisely the goods they are trying so hard to protect.

8. Detailed Codings

The following section sets out the underlying “workings” for my coding of each of the 38 expressions. For every expression, I indicate which of Freeman’s Hallmarks it clearly includes, and, where relevant, which Hallmarks it excludes. Hallmarks that are neither signalled nor ruled out remain context-dependent. They may or may not be present in a given usage.

I also classify the role each expression plays in relation to polarisation. This is whether it functions primarily as a concept (a name for a polarised state), a description, a suggested cause, an observed effect, or an implied remedy. In addition, I note the valence the expression assigns to the Hallmarks it invokes. This is whether it presents polarisation-like dynamics as broadly desirable/necessary or as harmful/regrettable.

Finally, drawing on Moral Foundations Theory, I identify the main moral domains activated by each expression. A phrase that encodes fear of outsiders, for example, is read as operating within the Care/Harm domain, where separation is framed as protection of one’s own. Expressions of disgust or contamination point to Purity/Degradation concerns, where distancing from perceived “dirt” is experienced as moral hygiene. Conversely, idioms that lament the damage caused by social schisms, or that criticise the injustice of shunning others, are read as avoiding Harm or Oppression.

Taken together, Hallmarks engaged or excluded, functional role, moral valence, and moral foundations, these codings offer a structured way of seeing how each expression not only describes conflict, but also justifies, critiques, or morally situates polarisation within the community’s own linguistic universe.

Below are the workings for my codings of each of the 38 expressions. I set out the Hallmarks positively included and, if any, those that are excluded. Hallmarks not mentioned could either apply or not given the context in which the term is used. I also record the nature of the expression; for instance, is it used as a concept or to denote a cause of polarisation. I suggest whether an expression assigns a positive or negative valence to the Hallmarks it invokes. Last, using MFT, I propose moral domains activated by the language of the expression. Thus, if a phrase expresses fear of the Other, whether well-grounded or not, then the moral domain in which conflict with the source of that fear resides is one of Care. For expressions of disgust, the moral domain triggered would favour purity. Whatever the broader politics, taking the expression at face value, one is maximising Care for one’s community by separating from threat, just as one is Purifying one’s society by scorning mess or dirt. If, however, the phrase laments the dangers that social schisms bring or points to the inequities of shunning Others, then the moral domains at issue are avoiding Harm and Oppression.



1. *Masseddi tai bembe*, ('only united when still in the goats intestines'), Bugis.

Hallmarks

The literal translation 'together in the same place' does not do justice to the richer, contextual imagery supplied by the participant. This is: 'only united while still in the goat's intestines. When it comes out, it becomes faeces, becomes small seeds that cannot unite again'.

This expression codes for the **distance Hallmark** as the seeds separate after the unity of the intestines is absent. There is a sense that the separation gets worse over time. The seeds spread ever outwards in the faeces, thus denoting the **centrifugal Hallmark**. The distancing is between like categories (seeds) and thus involves the horizontal Hallmark. The distancing is however permanent. The participant expressly notes that the seeds 'cannot unite again', thus the **impermanence Hallmark** is excluded.

The expression does not include or exclude the separation as a binary, nor necessarily constituting a threat. There is no clear implication that the separation affects society as a whole or clusters opinion at the poles (critical mass). Although faeces is pejorative, the parties to the antagonism are cast as seeds and so there does not appear to be any explicit Othering of other parties to the division.

Nature and Function

The expression describes a state.

Moral Orientation

This expression has a negative valence on the moral domain of pollution. Separation is literally shit. Unity is strongly valued.



2. *Sitettongeng*, ('insisting on / mutually strengthening one's stance'), Bugis

Hallmarks

The expression implies the **distance Hallmark** as there are separate stances, hence both sides need to strengthen their own. The conflict is **binary** as the sides are 'mutually' strengthening their position. The **centrifugal Hallmark is signalled as opposing positions undergo strengthening over time. The implication is that significant conflict can arise as people entrench themselves, thus the treat Hallmark is in play, although weakly.**

Despite the threat, there is no indication of Othering, or a critical mass of contention at either extreme. This could just as well be a dispute between minorities whose impact on society as a whole is minimal. The dispute could also be asymmetrical, a villager defying a chief, for example. There is an added sense that the antagonism could subside as quickly as it arises.



Nature

The expression functions as a description of a polarised state. It also ascribes a potential cause to polarisation: inclination to stand one's ground and not to compromise on fundamental issues.

Moral orientation

The expression carries positive valence of people or groups standing their ground or standing up for themselves regardless of pressure. The moral domain is fairness and, to the extent that the person is a leader taking unpopular decisions, authority/hierarchy.

3. *Siallang* ('Negating each other' / 'excluding division'), Duri

Hallmarks

The participant provided an alternative meaning: 'an excluding division' for context. The **distance Hallmark** is engaged in that the parties are so separated that they negate or exclude each other. There is a suggestion of mutuality and, with that, the binary and **horizontal Hallmark** come into play. The nature of the conflict is so serious and radicalising that the **critical mass** and **threat Hallmark** are probably involved.

This state, however, may exist between extremist groups and not engage broader society. The participant states that parties to this kind of conflict need intermediaries to maintain communication. The remedy, if any, for this 'excluding division' will need to be provided by the intermediary.

Nature and Function

The expression could function as an abstract concept like polarisation. In fact, it bears six of the Hallmarks and does not expressly exclude the other two. It also describes the phenomenon.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds weak negative connotations. The negativity comes from the a priori idea that negation and exclusion are a social problems. It is, however, not difficult to imagine the term being in a neutral fashion, as a concept, without coding separation or exclusion as a bad thing.



4. ***Sisanggang dua pattu*** **'du' ('separated by two cardinal directions'), Mandar**

Hallmark

The **distance** and **binary Hallmarks** are self-evident. The phrase describes a separation into two opposite groups. In this state and from its contextual usage, it can be inferred the two groups contain most of the members of the body or society, indicating the critical **mass Hallmark**. The imagery also supports the idea that the separation is among people within society or at the same level, thus indicating the **horizontal Hallmark**.

The image however does not suggest that the distance is becoming worse. The separation could just as well be static. It is not obvious if the separation is capable of being overcome. The coding does not support threat or Othering.

Nature

The expression has the feel of a concept and describes a state of separation.

Moral Orientation

The expression is matter-of-fact and is neutral in valence.



5. Bali sola (friend-enemy), Mandar

Hallmark

The **distance** and **binary Hallmarks** are self-evident. It is also more than likely that the antagonism falls within the **horizontal Hallmark**. The phrase also suggests the **impermanence Hallmark**.

Nothing about the phrase implies that the issue mobilises society at large, will get worse or that serious threat or Othering is involved. Indeed, the expression resembles the Gen X concept ‘frenemies’: characterised by damaging gossip and interpersonal drama. However, the participant reports that bali sola has more serious overtones. It can refer to more than

one person, or entire groups who feign solidarity or friendship. It typically means some within a group have become part of an enemy or opponent. These persons are singled out for condemnation because of the danger they pose. Their identity is known pointing to the fact that, for some reason, they cannot be completely shunned despite their known betrayal.

Nature

The expression is descriptive and ascribes a cause for antagonism: betrayal.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds a negative valence in the moral domain of betrayal and harm.



6. *Ngalih dewa ulah butha* ('they are changing the gods'), Bali

Hallmark

The meaning supplied by the participant is highly contextual. It is 'looking for God to pray at the temple, but because many people want to pray, their behaviour is like *butha kala* (devil), nonhuman'. One gets the impression of over-subscription or over-crowding affecting the sanctity or spiritual power of a place, changing the behaviour of some worshippers into something profane, something evil. The true cause of this switch is shrouded. Were these worshippers always evil? Or did something about the throng cause apostasy? Did overcrowding disrupt sanctity or an elite status? Interestingly, the antagonists are people who, until recently, were fellow believers, not outsiders.

The **distance Hallmark** is signalled but spiritually, not physically. The Other is within the same holy space. The **binary Hallmark** applies because the split is portrayed as between the godly and devils, the human and non-human. The division takes place within the **horizontal Hallmark**, between co-religionists. The **critical mass Hallmark** is suggested because 'many people' are clustered at the poles of this antagonism. Between God and *butha kala* there is no middle ground. The idea of gods being replaced or the devil being unloosed activates the **threat Hallmark**, while the **Othering Hallmark** is also engaged by posing the opposition as the devil or non-human.

The phrase does not positively exclude impermanence but it does not tick this box either. The impermanence of this state is presumably only achieved by defeating or expelling the 'devils'. Also, since the conflict could be frozen in deadlock, a widening, centrifugal gyre is not necessarily imputed.

Although this phrase describes a particular situation and is cast in religious metaphor, it covers a full six of the eight Hallmarks. It should be noted that although the expression is coded for the **horizontal Hallmark**, it is susceptible for use asymmetrically, where religious dogma is weaponised to persecute. This is true of most of the expressions. However sayings about changing the gods or people becoming devils, are rather prone to authoritarian use.

Nature

The expression is descriptive. It also ascribes a direct cause for the conflagration.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds a positive valence. It is worth reminding that while the situation it describes is negative, the expression leans strongly towards applying the Hallmarks in response to the situation. It is thus positive towards polarisation and operates on the moral domains of ensuring sanctity / purity and caring for the true faith.



7. Nicca, ('provocateur, one who provokes or divides people'), Bali

Hallmark

The **distance Hallmark** obviously applies. This is precisely the work of the agente provocateur. The centrifugal Hallmark operates in the sense that, as long as the provocations persist, it is likely that people will move further and further away from each other.

Whether this activity mobilises a critical mass of people, or spills over into threat and Othering depends on other factors, including the agent's propaganda skills. Nothing about the phrase suggest that the issue necessarily mobilises society at large, will get worse or that there is serious threat or Othering involved. It is also not clear whether the conflict is binary. On reflection, we cannot necessarily ascribe this division to conflict on a horizontal level. The provocateur may act on private or sectarian motives but they may also be an agent of the state.

Impermanence is expressly excluded. This cause of polarisation is society is always present. Trouble-makers pose a manageable but irresoluble problem.

Nature

The expression is descriptive and ascribes a cause for antagonism: trouble-makers.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds a negative valence. The polarisation caused means trouble because it harms.



8. Wong iku ora jawaning blas e ('people who do not behave properly'), Java.

Hallmark

The **distance, binary and horizontal Hallmarks** apply. The moral judgement associated with improper behaviour also connotes, although more weakly, the **Othering Hallmark**.

Since it is behaviour that is criticised and not character, the door is left open on whether the situation is impermanent. The problem is not necessarily getting worse.

The participant states that the central concept of jawaning, refers not to ethnicity, but rather behaviour.

Jawaning is seen from a person's maturity or the properness of their conduct, acting like a Javanese person, or conforming to the standard values of adult Javanese people in general.

Nature

The expression is descriptive but also ascribes a cause for antagonism: improper behaviour.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds a positive valence. Disassociation from those who do not behave properly is implicitly supported. The polarisation caused is warranted because it preserves the authority of the rule-makers and cares for the community by identifying, shunning and warding off bad conduct.

9. *Londo Ireng*, ('Black Dutch'), Java

Hallmark

This expression has its roots in colonialism where certain islanders collaborated with or supported Dutch efforts to subjugate local polities. These people were called Black Dutch. The epithet has over time come to signify a state of conflict within a society characterised by the perception that some persons or groups are working for malignant external powers.

The **distance**, **binary** and **horizontal Hallmarks** apply. Give the historical context one does not have to dig too deep to find that threat is connoted. Of course the suggestion of collaboration carries an aspect of the **Othering**.

This participant states that this 18th and 19th century phrase signals that, while someone is not Dutch they are seen as 'half-hearted'. At worst, these members

of the local community are ardent supporters of the colonisers or express an equivalent politics today.

Nature

The expression ascribes a cause to social conflict springing from the fact that some persons or groups have divided loyalties. However the condition of being Black Dutch is also the effect of polarisation in the past, where groups or communities were perceived to have thrown their lot in with the colonisers.

Moral Valence

The expression codes the resultant division in a positive light. Black Dutch are to be shunned. The moral domains at stake are care and loyalty. In other words, shunning disloyal is an act of care for society as is insisting on solidarity. Another moral domain is liberty, in that being polarised from Black Dutch preserves the liberty of locals.



10. Laku, ('long road'), Java

Hallmark

This expression is unique in that it suggests that social conflict flows from the (spiritual or psychological) alienation of individuals from themselves. The **distance Hallmark** thus applies but not vis a vis the Other but from the Self. The **impermanence Hallmark** is engaged because the alienation at the root of conflict can be remedied by a long journey.

The **Othering Hallmark** does not apply. As the **threat Hallmark** is also (weakly) excluded, this phrase should technically not form part of this study. However, the

unique features of this expression, it is considered nevertheless. It could however be argued that not answering the spiritual call of laku poses the ultimate threat of all; an unfulfilled life without meaning of connection.

Nature

The expression recommends a remedy, laku.

Moral Orientation

The expression holds a negative valence. Self-alienation warrants a cure through laku. The expression activates the moral domains of purity and care.



11. *Hala Iyun*, ('outsiders now occupying the same area'), Batak

Hallmark

This expression activates the **distance**, **binary** and **horizontal Hallmarks**.

The **impermanence Hallmark** appears to be excluded in the short to medium term.

Nature

The expression ascribes a cause to the social conflict as old as the hills that become settled by disconcerting outsiders.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a (weak) positive valence in that polarisation from the settlers is impliedly a good thing on account of their occupation of land that would otherwise be available to locals. The expression activates the moral domain of care of own.

12. *Tangipali*, ('a hired woman who cries when there is a death in her village'), Sabu

Hallmark

This expression condemns insincerity. It activates the **distance**, **binary** and **horizontal Hallmarks**.

Nature

The expression ascribes conflict as flowing from transactional relationships and false shows of emotion. The implication is that social relations are not underpinned by true commitments but rather monetary interests. This breaks trust and brews conflict.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a positive valence in that it shuns conduct polarising society through false pretences. The expression activates the moral intuition against cheating.



13. *Suanggi*, (“a malevolent spirit taking the form of a ghost of a woman with a white long dress with a hole in her stomach”), Sabu

Hallmark

According to a participant, this expression is rooted in the folklore of attacks within the Sabu community in the late 1800s. These attacks were repeated in the 1999-2000 sectarian conflict in Tobelo, a town and a district on the island of Halmahera. After this conflict subsided, a specific *suanggi* appeared. She was the ghost of a young Muslim woman brutally attacked and killed in the conflict. As a ghost, she lured young men, particularly teachers, to their death. The irony is that this ghost flies to and targets a specific person that she previously liked or would have liked. She thus targets the best of the community that harmed her and not the worst. Her destructive power steadily grew but once her body was found and given a proper burial, her attacks stopped.

This expression is one of two in which distancing is not possible. In this case, the Other’s relentless revenge and supernatural power is impossible to escape. The expression signals the **binary Hallmark**. The pitiless ferocity of the attacks also suggests the **centrifugal Hallmark**. **Threat** is activated too. Given the eventual subsiding of the threat, the **impermanence Hallmark** applies.

Nature

The expression narrates the effects of polarisation in the past; effects which still hang over society for a number of generations. The story of this *suanggi* further highlights a remedy, which is the observance of burial rites and repentance by wrong-doers. Once these rituals were performed the *suanggi*’s punishment of a part of the community could end.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a negative valence because polarisation’s effects are shown to be indiscriminate and terrifying. The expression is rich in moral domains. It activates the moral domain against harm, against oppression (if historical) and against pollution caused by unperformed ceremonial duties towards a victim of past atrocity.



14. *Sebelah aer*, ('people from across the river'), Minahasa

Hallmark

This engages the **distance** and **binary Hallmark**. Since the people from across the river could be government officials or authorities too, horizontality is not necessarily implied.

The impermanence Hallmark appears to be excluded. The designation of difference appears relatively unchangeable.

A participant reports that this social term is a widely used to reflect societal division in Minahasa (including Manado). To this day, Christian communities in Manado / Minahasa often refer to Muslim groups using this phrase. The term originated during the colonial period, when the Dutch implemented a policy of residential segregation based on ethnicity and religion.

Nature

The expression functions both as a description and a cause of difference: the arrival of outsiders.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a neutral valence. While the words note difference they do not appear to exhort polarisation. The overarching sense is a matter-of-fact designation of people as coming from elsewhere. Although not obvious at first glance, the moral domain of subversion is triggered by the sense of infiltration. The more I dwelt on it, and thought of its context, the more ominous the overtone became.

15. *Orang bawah*, ('people from below'), Bolaang Mongondow

Hallmark

This engages the by now familiar triple of the **distance**, **binary** and **horizontal Hallmarks**. Additionally, although weak, there are connotations of the **Othering Hallmark**.

The **impermanence Hallmark** appears to be excluded. Difference is assigned based on the immutable characteristic of social status.

The participant states that those living around the South Bolaang Mongondow capital often refer to others outside their area as orang bawah. This term does not refer to geographic location but rather implies a perceived lower social status. These perceptions may be rooted in historical factors, particularly the legacy of the Bolaang Mongondow Kingdom, which could contribute to a sense of inherited nobility among locals.

Nature

The expression describes social distance within a society based on social status or origin.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a weak positive valence. The words do not explicitly exhort separation but appear to justify it. The moral domain in favour of maintaining social hierarchy is activated.

16. *Kaboro*, ('physically unattractive'), Bolaang Mongondow

Hallmark

This expression quite apparently engages the **distance**, **binary Hallmark** and, **horizontal Hallmark** and strongly sets up the **Othering Hallmark**.

The impermanence Hallmark appears to be excluded. The designation of difference appears based on unchangeable physical characteristics or a visceral aesthetic point of view. This is not likely to change.

Nature

The expression ascribes a cause for division. It works rhetorically to justify its Hallmarks because the other side is physically ugly.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a positive valence in that separating from people who are deemed unpleasant to look at is posited as justifiable. The expression is strongly pejorative and triggers the moral domain in favour of purity.

17. *Bulawaho*, ('a person who defies social norms or is stubborn' or 'a log, tree trunk'), Gorontalo

Hallmark

The reference to log or a tree trunk is a metonym for being Christian (the wooden cross) and thus carries undertones of defiance social norms with a profession of an alien faith. This expression denotes the **distance**, **binary**, **horizontal** and the **Othering Hallmarks**.

It is a close call but the impermanence Hallmark is not foundational to the expression's use. Because apostasy is not alleged, Threat is not necessarily implied.

The participant gave detailed context and commentary: 'The second meaning of bulawahu, refers to a log or piece of wood, specifically denotes a horizontal wooden beam, one that forms a cross, a symbol strongly associated with Christianity. In various social contexts a speaker may ask, "Is he bulawahu?" implicitly inquiring whether the denoted person is a Christian. In this sense, bulawahu in Gorontalo illustrates how language can function as a tool of power and social control. On one hand, it serves to preserve internal communal norms; on the other hand, it reinforces social boundaries based on religious and ethnic differences'.

Nature

The expression gives a cause for social division: stubbornness and/or adopting a foreign faith.

Moral orientation

The expression holds a positive valence because it is socially acceptable to judge or condemn people who behave badly or abandon local ways. The expression triggers the moral domains in favour of care and hierarchy by ostracising the defiant.



18. **Tau Selang ('people of different customs and religions who know some of the language and are eminent')**

Hallmark

This is a rare expression as far as codings go. It does not necessarily signify **distance**. Difference is thus not induced by distance as is the case in many other expressions. Yet the **binary Hallmark** and horizontal Hallmark are obviously in play.

The **threat Hallmark** and the **Othering Hallmark** are positively excluded. Indeed, the Other is accepted on the basis of their attempts to assimilate or contribute positively to Siau society. In pondering the meaning and intent of this phrase, it feels like the distinction is not necessarily permanent or impermanent.

Nature

The expression suggest a rule for accepting and including people of different customs (the opposite of

polarisation). This requires action from the Other. It is up to the Other to learn local languages or otherwise present themselves as valuable to the host society through eminence and rectitude.

Moral orientation

The expression awards acceptance to strangers if they observe or slot into the existing norms of the host society. The expression skirts the concept of polarisation and thus carries a neutral valence. It may be argued that, considered holistically, polarisation is implied to be a disvalue, carrying a negative valence. However, as will be noted from other words in the Siau language, polarisation is not per se a disvalue at all. Individuals are exempted from indifference (*tau sire*) and hostility (*tau kaporo*) based on how they behave. Tau selangs are not shunned but their reprieve is founded on contingent factors not a principled acceptance of people because they have 'different customs and beliefs'. This phrase does not celebrate diversity as an inherently good state.

As a thought experiment, in these two images, which best demonstrate the quality of being a *tau selang* and why?





19. Tau sire, ('outsiders'), Siau
20. Capriani, ('messy, dirty'), Siau
21. Kau kaporo, ('outsiders who behave badly, such as being drunkards or displaying immoral conduct'), Siau

Hallmarks

It feels as if an entire essay may be written about the Siau language for all the subtleties of distinction it draws. As we have seen above, tau selang bears some of the Hallmarks. Yet, semi-aculturated or eminent outsiders are valued and thus polarisation cannot be said to arise.

Valued Otherness is not afforded to insular, undistinguished outsiders (*tau sire*).

The **distance Hallmark** applies to them. So too does the **binary** and **Horizontal Hallmarks**. One gets the sense however that tau sire are met more with indifference than hostility.

Capriani, while meaning dirty or messy, (after a messy fruit), is a mocking expression used to point out groups of people considered disorganized or chaotic. It is sometimes used as an insult. It invokes the triad of distance, binary and horizontal Hallmarks, plus the Othering Hallmark. A group perceived to possess these qualities face rejection.

*Tau kaporo*²⁸ poses the same problem as *capriani*. The expressions invoke the **distance**, **binary**, **horizontal** and **Othering Hallmarks**. This does not however necessarily rise to the level of threat in all circumstances. Immorality and drunkenness constitutes nuisance and offensiveness, in the main. Those perceived to possess these characteristics would face hostility.

²⁸ Cross reference with *kaboro*, ('physically unattractive') in Bolaang Mongondow

Nature

Tau sire is a description. *Capriani* and tau kaporo ascribe a cause to the scorn: bad behaviour.

Moral valence

The moral valence of tau sire is neutral. It is not necessarily so that being an outsider has negative connotation. It designates them.

For the messy or dirty capriani and the immoral or drunk tau kaporos the Hallmarks are positive. Since they possess negative qualities, the resultant separation from or hostility towards the Other is impliedly acceptable.

Tau sire activates no distinct moral domain.

Capriani activates the domain in favour of purity.

Tau kaporo triggers the moral domains of purity and hierarchy.

The Siau language contains subtle distinctions that encapsulate entire academic debates around

immigration, social inclusion, and xenophobia. The participant was keen to point out, however, that for all the words and expressions generated to describe polarisation:

‘both in terms of reactions and language expressions - has so far remained subtle, largely due to the strong emphasis on harmony promoted by both the government and the church. The community has been more accustomed to practising harmony and seeking terms that foster unity, which may have led to a lack of awareness or even a forgetting of what division means and how they perceive and recognise the potential for fragmentation’.

Terms such as tau sire, tau selang, and tau kaporo demonstrate how language among Siau people encodes perceptions of otherness, hierarchy, and moral judgment. These lexical choices reveal implicit boundaries between the Siau-in group (*tau kite*) and various out-groups, shaped by differences in ethnicity, religion, and social conduct.’



Capriani



Tau kaporo

22. uKwehlukana okukhulu, ('extreme division'), isiZulu

23. uKwehlukana phakathi kwabantu, ('division among people'), isiZulu

Hallmarks

The first phrase is a concept, expressed in two words, and it engages six Hallmarks. The **distancing** and **horizontal Hallmarks** are self-evident. The **critical mass Hallmark** is implied. If division has reached levels of extremity between rival groups, polarisation is assumed to be widespread. The **threat** and **Othering Hallmarks** are also likely to be in play.

However it may not be assumed that the poles of division are pulling steadily away. *uKwehlukana*

okukhulu is agnostic as to whether the conflict involves two or more parties or if it is impermanent.

This expression has a lot in common with the Duri word, *siallang*, an 'excluding division', although they do not share all the same Hallmarks. Small differences in application of a term can seed different Hallmarks

The second phrase engages, as a matter of definition, only the **distance** and **horizontal Hallmarks**. The conflict it covers ranges from a significant but constructively handled difference to those highly emotive issues prompting civil war. The scope it covers, from soft to hard division, means that it can be used to describe serious and widespread polarisation.

Small differences matter. For instance if *ukwehlukana phakathi kwabantu* meant division among the

people, then the critical mass Hallmark would be foundational. In both expressions, the division could be among more than two factions of society.

Nature

uKwehlukana okukhulu is a concept used a part of abstract political thought.

uKwehlukana phakathi kwabantu is a description of a social state.

Moral Valence

uKwehlukana okukhulu casts polarisation in a negative light. Extremism triggers the moral domain of harm.

uKwehlukana phakathi kwabantu also holds a negative valence. It triggers the moral domain against harm.

uKwehlukana okukhulu ('*extreme division*')



24. *Indonga ziwelene*, ('the walls come into collision'), isiZulu

Hallmarks

This expression was garnered from a book collecting idioms not from a participant or via a researcher. It describes the circumstance where society as a whole is affected by a dispute between two weighty adversaries. The **distance**, **binary**, **critical mass** and **threat Hallmarks** are engaged. Although the expression envisages the principal protagonists to be people of significance, perhaps chiefs or kings, the horizontal Hallmark applies for two reasons. When

kings clash, they are on the same level. And when this conflict brings ordinary people to arms, they too are on the same level in opposing bands or armies.

The **Othering Hallmark** is excluded by this expression. The 'enemy', like oneself, are foot-soldiers.

Nature

The idiom is a description

Moral Valence

Polarisation is seen in a negative light. The moral domain triggered is against Harm.



25. *uHlanga lwakho lwenza umehluko, ('your race makes a difference'), isiZulu*

Hallmarks

Imagine being in an argument with someone from another culture or race, with both sides trying to reach consensus on the issues in dispute. At some point a deadlock arises. You or your opponent face the prospect of going your separate ways or fighting it out. How could this precursor to all the ensuing unpleasantness of polarisation be explained? In isiZulu, a frank and laconic observation may be made: Listen here, we're not going to agree because 'your race makes a difference'. It makes a difference to how and why you are pursuing your claims. Put differently, your racial characteristics pose an absolute bar to an accord between us.

The **distance**, **binary**, **horizontal** and **Othering Hallmarks** are activated.

The impermanence Hallmark is expressly excluded.

The boardroom image generated for this expression operates at two levels. The two delegations cannot trust each other because an inherent ontological difference subsists. The same could also be said of the rift between the lone white delegate seated on the right hand of the table and the rest of his own delegation.

Nature

The expression functions as a description and cause of polarisation.

Moral valence

The expression carries a positive connotation vis a vis polarisation. There is something fundamentally irreconcilable about the Other that makes division or conflict inevitable and necessary.



26. *Wametofautiana hadi kindugu,* ('they have even disagreed as far as among family'), Swahili

Hallmarks

The **distance** and **horizontal Hallmarks** immediately stand out. The **critical mass** and **centrifugal Hallmarks** are implied because, if social divisions are so intense as to split families, they span society and have

clustered groups at the worsening poles of belief, feeling of opinion on the matter.

Nature

The expression is both a description and an ascription of an effect of polarisation: enmity within families.

Moral Valence

The expression seeks polarisation in a strongly negative light. It activates the moral domain against harm.



27. *Uhasama wa makundi,* ('hostility between groups' or 'sectarian hostilities', Swahili

Hallmark

The expression involves the **distance**, **horizontal** and **threat Hallmarks**. At first glance, it appears to necessarily imply critical mass but the groups or

sects could just as well be loud, sectarian minorities within a society.

Nature

The expression is a concept and description.

Moral Valence

The hostility the phrase describes carries a negative valence. It initiates the moral domain against harm



28. *Kusagarisana huunza kurwisana*, ('Failure to co-exist brings conflict'), Shona

Moral Valence

The phrase carries negative connotations. The moral domain is to avoid harm.

Hallmark

At a glance, the meaning encompasses the **distance**, **impermanence** and **horizontal Hallmarks**. Additionally, the expression suggests, if weakly, that there is already a failure to 'co-exist' of some significance triggering the **critical mass Hallmark**. This is not mere disagreement.

Nature

The expression is both a description and proposes a remedy.



29. *Kusatenderana kwasvika kumisha nemhuri*, ('Conflict is no longer only political; it's between family and community members'), Shona

Hallmark

The **distance** and **horizontal Hallmarks** clearly apply. The conflict is expanding and widespread pushing people into rival groups throughout society, therefore the **critical mass** and **centrifugal Hallmarks** also apply.

This expression joins wametofautiana hadi kindugu in Swahili in measuring the extent of polarisation by its effect on the family.

Nature

The expression involves a description and an effect.

Moral Valence

The connotation is strongly negative. The moral domains against harm and betrayal are activated.

This expression is strikingly similar to the Swahili saying: 'they have even disagreed as far as among family'.

30. *Nawu wa tipolotiki wu va avanyisa*, ('Political systems or laws are drawing people apart'), Xitsonga

Hallmark

The **distance** and **horizontal Hallmarks** clearly apply. The conflict is expanding, bringing more and more people into rival camps but it is too early to say if this will necessarily compose a critical mass within society. **The centrifugal Hallmark** thus also applies.

Nature

The expression ascribes a cause: party politics or legal systems.

Moral Valence

The dissention carries a negative valence. The moral domain against harm comes into play, although the harm may not have manifested yet.



**31. *Disela-mmapa ga di ratane,*
(‘Competitors cannot share
the same space’), seTswana.**

Hallmark

A reader who has persisted this far will be able to code an expression’s Hallmarks for themselves by now. 1. Does it suggest distance between groups? 2. Does it tend to symbolise conflict between two parties? 3. Does it suggest that the conflict is worsening with parties pulling away or could it be a conflict with a static balance of forces (centrifugal)? 4. Is most of society clustered at the poles of this issue or is there still significant middle ground (critical mass)? 5. Is the contention between entities and groups more or less at the same level? 6. Is the polarisation something that can change go away or

is it frozen as a societal fault-line as long as the same circumstances persist? 7. Does the conflict threaten significant social discord or even unrest. 8. Does the conflict involve Othering or stereotyping or insulting behaviour?

Nature

The expression speaks to the cause of polarisation, which is competition. It also strongly hints at the remedy which is, if possible, to separate the competitors.

Moral Valence

The expression implies that polarisation and competition both have bad outcomes (cannot share space). It triggers, although weakly, the moral domain against Harm.



32. *Anthu ambiri amaopa kulankhula*, ('many people are afraid to speak'), Chichewe

Hallmark

The phrase “many people” suggests that such a large portion of society is split into antagonistic camps that anyone expressing a view is avoided at the risk of harm. The **critical mass** and **threat Hallmarks** are implied.

The expression could refer to Big Brother oppression but it could just as well refer to mutually hostile camps on a symmetrical plane. The camps exist but are members are too afraid to publicly cluster into opposing groups. In such a world conflict is

expressed surreptitiously up to a point – and then potentially cataclysmically.

This expression is part of a rare group where distancing between antagonists cannot happen. People are forced to be in the same society, grimly keeping their fervently felt views to themselves.

Nature

The expression identifies the effects of polarisation or the fear that the threat hallmark will eventuate. This fear causes mass self-censorship.

Moral Valence

The moral valence is negative and the moral domains it invokes is against harm and oppression.



33. *Kusiyana maganizo pakati pa anthu* ('differences of opinion among people'), Chichewe

Hallmark:

The **distance**, **horizontal** and **impermanence** Hallmarks are implied.

Threat is not necessarily implied as differences could be serious or minor. We also do not know how widespread differences are. A distinction between

this phrase and the XiTsonga expression, *nawu wa tipolotiki wu va avanyisa*, ('Political systems or laws are drawing people apart'), is that, in the latter, the verb, 'is drawing', suggests that differences are actively expanding.

Nature

The expression is a concept and description.

Moral Valence

Negative, against harm.



34. *'N huis verdeeld ... ('a house divided ...')*, Afrikaans

Hallmark

The phrase foreshortens a biblical verse that a house divided comes to a fall. The expression requires a

listener to complete the adage thus strengthening its psychological resonance and making the message sound more ominous.

The **distance**, **horizontal** and **threat** Hallmarks seem obvious. The situation is reversible, that is before division causes total collapse, thus the **impermanence** Hallmark is suggested. It is also

implied that a significant proportion of people within a given group are implicated in this division, clustered into rival camps. The situation is not necessarily worsening. However toxic, the division can be frozen in place.

Nature

The expression is a description.

Moral Valence

The proverb gives a negative connotation. It activates the moral domain against harm.



35. *Die skape van die bokke skei,* (‘separate the sheep from the goats’), Afrikaans

Hallmark

This biblical metaphor is used to describe the separation of people into two groups on Judgement Day, the righteous and unrighteous. It is sometimes used to justify separation between people, on either

a moral, racial or cultural level, in secular life. The **distance** and **binary Hallmarks** obviously apply. Given the stakes in its biblical sense, (paradise or damnation), the expression plausibly activates the **critical mass** and **Othering Hallmarks** too. Although the distinction between righteous and unrighteous is supposed to be drawn by a divine adjudicator, the expression codes for the **horizontal Hallmark** too because, as this term is contextually used, humans are supposed to uphold this division too on their own accord.

The expression excludes the **impermanent Hallmark**.

Nature

The expression describes a state of separation

Moral Valence

The separation between righteous and unrighteous human beings is posited as a good and necessary thing; something God will ultimately do. The moral domains in favour of purity (excluding the bad) and care (shepherding the good) are activated.



36. *Die een se dood is die ander se brood, ('one person or groups' death is the other's bread'), Afrikaans*

Hallmark:

The expression obviously engages the **binary, horizontal** and **threat Hallmarks**. It is the sort of idiom that suggests a general societal truism: groups within society will necessarily be pitted against another at some point. The impermanence Hallmark is implied because, in between moments of inevitable, murderous polarisation, there will be periods of quiescence.

This is a disconcerting expression where antagonistic groups cannot separate. The cycle where one benefits from the adversity of the other has bound them in an eternal Hobbesian cycle of nasty and brutish conflict.

Nature

The expression is a description of a state and its effect; taking the spoils.

Moral Valence

Polarisation is seen in a negative light and the moral domains of harm and oppression kick in.



37. *P'thans wala ewmesa sxaw*, ('dirty negative energy'), Nasa Yuwe

Hallmark:

The expression that gave birth to this project easily meets the **distance**, **horizontal** and **threat Hallmarks**. Dirty negative energy can lift as much as it descends, activating the **impermanence Hallmark**. Given its ubiquity and potency when it arrives the **critical mass** and **centrifugal Hallmarks** are strongly implied.

Dirty negative energy could divide people into two or more groups and it does not necessarily imply that the division, albeit containing threat, involves Othering.

Nature

The expression is a description of a social state and an ascription of the cause of division, something with both hints of a natural disaster and supernatural interference in the life of a society.

Moral Valence:

The expression places polarisation in a negative light. It activates the moral domains against harm and, interestingly, against pollution. Whenever an expression 'mobilises' more than one moral domain it may be argued that its rhetorical efficacy is enhanced.



38. *bellum omnium contra omnes*, ('war of all against all'), Latin

It could be a permanent state or not. It is not necessarily getting worse. The other side is not derided.

Nature

The phrase is a description.

Moral Valence:

The state of expansive war is negatively viewed. The domain against harm is activated. The domain against subversion is implied as this state is caused by a general social breakdown or breach of order.

Hallmark

The **distance**, **critical mass** ('all'), **horizontality** and **threat** ('war') **Hallmarks** necessarily apply.

The **binary Hallmark** does not apply as multiple fronts are opened.



Freeman's Hallmarks

<p>a. Distance</p> <p>The people or groups are at a substantial distance from one another on the issue that polarises them. The distance can be physical, ideological or emotional.</p> <p>Polarisation is not a slight disagreement on details. People are far apart.</p>	<p>b. Binary</p> <p>Polarisation occurs usually between two parties or groups – rural / urban, white / black, Christian / Muslim, village A / village B. We want to avoid calling a situation ‘polarised’ when it is messy and there is general social discord and conflict from all sides and at multiple levels. Being binary is not a veto Hallmark however. If the dividing lines between three or more parties are clear, this could be described as polarisation as opposed to anarchy, mayhem or tumult.</p>
<p>c. Critical Mass</p> <p>Polarisation does not exist if there are many people in the middle ground on a particular topic. Polarisation happens when most of the people are gathered at opposite ends of the issues. If this were a picture it would be of two lollipops at opposite ends of a stick. There is a critical mass of people clustered at each pole and a smaller mass of people, opinion or agreement in between.</p>	<p>d. Centrifugal</p> <p>Polarisation is about movement. There is a worsening situation. Polarised people at different poles are primed to move away from, not towards, the opposing pole. The common ground is disappearing, not growing. It proves more difficult to find non-destructive ways of resolving the differences.</p>
<p>e. Horizontal</p> <p>This is an important one. On our definition, polarisation exists only between groups in society. It does not involve conflict between the state and citizens, or a Drug Cartel and villagers, or the Church and parishioners. These conflicts are between one side with constituted power and authority and the other which is usually weaker, unorganised and subordinate. In a conflict between a government and the people, power flows vertically. The dispute between them is not polarisation.</p> <p>Polarisation can however be between two ethnic groups, or when two rival gangs are embroiled in worsening conflict. Or between people with different ideologies, interests or claims on resources.</p>	<p>f. Impermanent</p> <p>Polarisation is a state that can be entered into and exited from. Conflict that has existed forever or is neither getting worse or better is not polarisation. Polarisation is fluid. The fault-lines may shift. Events can make it better or worse. If people pull together over time, then polarisation ceases.</p>

g. Threat

Not every fiery dispute is reducible to polarisation. FC Barcelona vs. Real Madrid is not a story of polarisation. Their fans are merely rivals. Cars vs. pedestrians is also not a story of polarisation. People supporting one or the other are simply on opposite sides of a policy dispute. Polarisation arises around bigger questions involving perceived threats to the stability of society or the political system. Ask yourself the question, if this polarisation gets worse is there the danger of social unrest or the common identity splitting apart. For anything less than that, there are better words to use. This study uses threat as a veto Hallmark. This means that if the meaning of an expression positively excludes its use to describe possible or actual, serious or large-scale social disruption, disorder or violence, it does not qualify as contender for 'polarisation'.

h. Othering

This hallmark is the logical consequence of the other hallmarks. It overlaps directly with issues such as tribalism and sectarianism and the way that these breed antagonism between groups, tribes, sects and the poles of debate of an issue. In a state of polarisation, emotion is the norm. Viewpoints radicalise, complexity declines, allegiance trumps ideas, and a combination of in-group romanticisation and out-group demonisation prevails. The addition of moral foundations theory to the mix suggests that polarisation may be triggered by unconscious, pre-wired moral intuitions in the minds of humans as a species.



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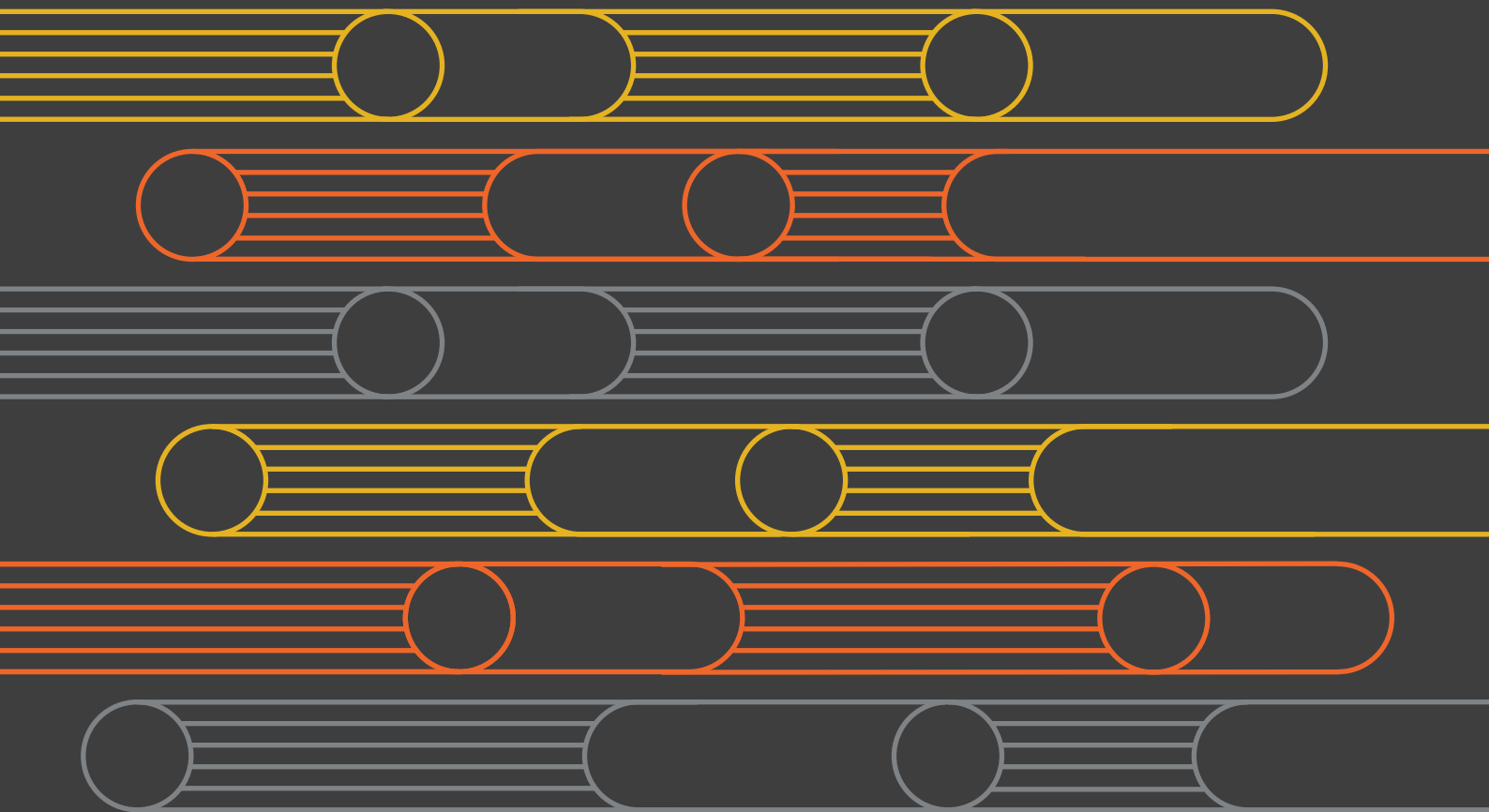
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