

Remembering Eritrean heroes in contemporary history

*A Short Biography
Of
Sheik Abdelkadir Kebire*



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Abdulkadir Mohammed Saleh Kebire

Abdulkadir Mohammed Saleh **Kebire**, whose name of fame is simply '**Kebire**' was born in 1902 in Massawa but some people say that he was actually born in his mother's village somewhere in Dankalia. The name '**Kebire**', by which he is known simply means senior or great and was a direct translation of his great grandfather, named 'Abe'. The name 'Abe' means great thus Kebir or affectionately, **Kebire**. His ancestors which were a devout religious people, since the middle of the 19th century, and became known as the '**Kebire**' family. As a child, **Kebire** attended Khelwa (Quranic School) where he studied the Quran and Arabic. Later, he attended primary school and graduated from the fourth grade because under the Italian occupation, children were not allowed to have any further schooling than the fourth grade. Yet, he never stopped the pursuit of knowledge. Though mainly self-educated, **Kebire** benefited from his elders in his family and the exposure to the rich library that his family possessed.

At the age of 18, **Kebire** left for Egypt where he witnessed the revolution of Saad Zequl against the British, an incident that left its mark on him and shaped his rebellious character. A self-educated person, **Kebire** became more interested in politics and was determined to make a change in his country to improve the livelihood of his people. When he was later hired by the Italians to work as an advisor and translator in the Italian Embassy in Yemen, it was a great opportunity for him to acquaint himself with notable politicians and intellectuals of the era. He became a respected socialite around the diplomatic circles in Yemen and gained many friends and acquaintances. His importance was noticeable to the extent that he participated in the team that was set to broker a peace deal between Saudi-Arabia and Yemen over a border disagreement between the two countries. The team included important personalities of the era: Shiekh Amin Al-Hussaini of Palestine (the leader/Martyr of the famous Palestinian uprising); The notable writer Hashim Al Atassi from Syria and Prince Shekib Arselan of Lebanon. During his trips to Saudi Arabia to negotiate peace, he met and befriended the Saudi Prince, later King, Faisal Bin AbdulAziz, who used to call him Al Messewe'e (the Massawan).

Upon his return to Eritrea, he briefly entered the business world and became a successful businessman. He funded many charitable projects including one for the establishment of a technical school in Mai Dshto in Akria. Obsessed with encouraging education, **Kebire** became a controversial figure by calling for the education of women, something which was a taboo in those days. He believed that only by education and unity can a people be masters of their own destiny. These messages were his vehicle to the world of politics.

In April 1941 (2nd WW) when the Italians were defeated, the victorious British Army maintained the Italian governing structure. **Kebire** was enraged that a "liberating force" could still depend on the services of a system that oppressed Eritreans. He was aware of the risks that were facing Eritrea and raced against time to form a party that will struggle to safeguard the interest of Eritrea. To this end, together with his friend Gebremeskel Weldu, he found the Liberal Nationalist Party a few months after the defeat of the Italians. Later, he organized the first ever public political demonstration in modern Eritrean history to oppose the continuation of the Italian bureaucratic structure. **Kebire's** and his friend Gebremeskel Weldu demanded that all colonial Italian bureaucrats be removed from all administrative positions. He demanded that a committee composed of able Eritreans should be handed over the civilian aspects of the administration and be responsible for the affairs of their country. The British had different plans and refused to cooperate.

Kebire was determined to expand his power base and towards this end, he met with notable politicians of the period to achieve that goal. This led to the formation of the Mahber Fiqri Hager (Association of the Love of the Nation) which **Kebire** was one of its founding members. He served as the party's vice chairman for five years.


In the forties, the Eritrean arena was full of political parties because the big powers had a design for the future of Eritrea. Ethiopia intensified its bid and started to finance the Andnet party. Patriotic Eritreans also intensified their struggle to confront any decision that might endanger the welfare of their people and put the future of Eritrea at risk. In this atmosphere, the famous convention known as 'Wa'ela Bet Ghiorgis', where all religious leaders, social notables and politicians of the time attended was convened. Political parties left the convention divided on the major issue of the type of relation they should have with Ethiopia.

As a consequences of the outcome of the Bet Ghiorgis Convention and other concerns that Ibrahim Sultan espoused, the Islamic League (Rabita Al Islamiya) was formed in 1946. The president of the party was Al Said Bekri Al Murghani while Ibrahim Sultan was the Secretary General of the party. **Kebire** was elected as the Party's leader in Asmara and its surroundings. In realty, Ibrahim was the strategist and visionary of the party while **Kebire** was the political dynamo behind the formidable force of the Islamic League.

In June 10, 1946, thousands of members of the Islamic league and other Eritreans gathered to listen to **Kebire's** political speech. As in previous times, in that speech, **Kebire** emphasized the importance of education, "I repeated the words '**Freedom**' and '**Independence**' excessively, but I didn't mention the means. That is because the means [to freedom and independence] is obvious and they have only one door: it is education. If we are truly demanding freedom and Independence, we have only one means to achieve that: education alone, education alone..." he said. After that long speech in which **Kebire** outlined his party's goals and demands, **Kebire** become the most admired and the most charismatic leader of the age. His oratory skill and sound vision was confirmed.

Fluent in Arabic, Tigrigna, Tigre, Afar and Italian, **Kebire** was a trusted politician and an admired orator. He was known for his bravery and respectful character. His speeches were bold, yet diplomatic. His personality was expressed candidly in a song of the time: "**Kebire's** mouth that drips words of honey" became a household jingle.

A letter dated Aug. 25, 1948, which **Kebire** wrote to his friend Shiekh Nur-Hussien who was residing in Somalia, characterizes his humble character. The letter was written to brief Shiekh Nur-Husseini about the developments in Eritrea. Though many considered **Kebire** one of the best leaders (if not the best), in that letter he wrote: "...if only you were not far, you would be the right person to lead us dear brother. But they found me and I had to bear the responsibilities". Such was the nature of the humble man who was eager to serve his nation with honesty and dedication.

	<p>ካብ ሽሕ ዓመት ብውርደት፣ ሓንቲ ዓመት ብክብረት ምንባር ከላ ይበልጽ</p> <p>ዓብደልቃድር ከቢረ፣ ንኣብ ሰማል ዝቅመጥ ዝነበረ ዓርቲብ ካብ ዝጸሕፍዎ ደብዳቤ</p>
	<p>እቲ ዝለዓለ ወድ ሰብ ዝውንኖ፣ ክቡርን ጥጋ ኣልቦን ደሙ ኢዩ-እዚ ድማ፣ ኣብ ምዕራፋት ናይቲ ንፍትሒ ዝካየድ ኣህጉራዊ ቻልሲ፣ ሓንቲ ገጽ ንምጽሓፍ ኢዩ ክኸፈል። እቲ ዕላማ ፍትሒ ምጭባጥ ወይ እናፈተንካ ምማት ኢዩ። ከካታትኻ እዚ እዩ። ዕላማኻ ሽላ ፍትሒ እዩ።</p> <p>ዓብደልቃድር ከቢረ፣ ኣብ ተመሳሳሊ ደብዳቤ</p>
	<p>Source: Aynfelale by Alemseged Tesfay</p>

The Andnet party considered him one of the most dangerous men who could undermine their struggle for the unconditional union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. He was perceived as the thorn that stood on their way. He received many threatening lives and many tried to intimidate him. The Andnet thugs burned his farm in Ailet. His Dairy farm in Merara was destroyed and armed men of the Andnet 'shiftas' forcefully took all the cows in the farm. Nothing stopped him from struggling for the self-determination of Eritrea. He loudly said that he was only afraid of the Almighty and no one else. "Cowards can take my life but they can never own my conviction and views", is the belief that **Kebire** so much practiced.



Hon. AlKader Kebire the father of Martyrs and Member of blocco Di Indipendenza

Source: 2000 nation of jeberti

By March 1949, **Kebire** has become a mighty political figure and a real threat to the Andnet party. He was assigned the task of presenting Eritrea's case in the UN General Assembly. All Eritrean patriots counted on **Kebire** to present their case. The Islamic League was confident of his ability to win the debate and give a winning argument. The Andnet Party was threatened and had another plan.

While the British administration was in power, all political parties in the country were allowed to send their representatives to the UN Assembly. Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan and Abdelkadir Kebire were elected from Al Rabita Al Islamiya (The Islamic League). But on a Sunday night days on the eve of his expected departure to New York to present Eritrea's case in the General Assembly of the UN, an Ethiopian agent shot **Kebire** with a pistol in a street in Asmara. After losing much blood, he was taken to hospital where doctors struggled to save him for two days and nights. On Tuesday, after stubbornly holding to life, **Kebire** was pronounced dead. His killer, a known thug in the streets of Asmara, was shipped to Harer in Ethiopia where he lived in fear until his died a few years after. Many elderly people of the time knew the member of the Andnet party who was behind the hired thug who assassinated **Kebire**.



Yohanes Tseggai (2nd from left) with the great patriot Abdekadir Kebire(right) in 1949 a few days before Kebire's martyrdom at the hand of assassin agent of Ethiopia

What would have been the outcome of his presentation if **Kebire** lived to present Eritrea's case to the UN, is left to pondering and imagination. With **Kebire** out of the game, the Aklilu Habteweld team had to face a weakened Ibrahim Sultan and a saddened team. Omar Qadi, another Eritrean patriot, a lawyer by profession commented on the absence of **Kebire**, by saying that the "Independence movement of Eritrea lost its

brightest lawyer". Ibrahim Sultan used to say, "I lost my right hand" in reference to the death of the great **Kebire**.

On a sad Wednesday of 1949, **Kebire** who was 47 years old was put to his final resting-place in Asmara. Thousands of Eritreans and foreign dignitaries walked behind **Kebire's** funeral—a procession that many claim was the biggest in those days.

There went **Kebire, the father of Martyrs**.

*In the forties, when **Kebire** sacrificed his life, Eritreans were divided into two major political blocs: one advocating unity with Ethiopia and another opting for independence. Each bloc believed to own the truth and fiercely struggled to destroy the other bloc. In the process, Eritreans lost Eritrea, which slipped between their fingers. It took Eritreans tens of thousands of lives and forty years of devastating struggle to recover Eritrea. Naturally, Eritreans are lamenting over the wrong decisions taken in the forties. **Today, there is a political divide and it is important to learn from that history more than any other time.***

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Ref: The ELEM vision