

Remembering Eritrean heroes in contemporary history

A Short Biography
Of
Saleh Eyay



Compiled and edited
By

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*This biographical sketch is compiled from the **book Historical dictionary of Eritrea by Dan Connell and Tom Killion and Woldeyesus Ammar's notes in Nharnet News of november 14, 2004.***

Saleh Ahmed Eyay (1938-2004). An important early nationalist leader, Saleh Eyay was born to a Bilen family in Keren and attended the Point Four technical school in Asmara in the 1950s, where he was involved in early demonstrations against Ethiopian rule. In 1956, he immigrated to Port Sudan, where he met Mohammed Said Nawd. In 1958, he joined him and six others in founding the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM, or Mahber Shewate). He returned to Eritrea in 1959 to become an underground organizer, first in the Ali Ghidir area and then Keren and was arrested three times spending a year in prison in 1964-65.

After the ELM was decimated by Ethiopian security forces and disarmed by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) when it sought to field a small military force, Saleh joined the ELF and became its representative in Port Sudan. He participated in the ESLAH (reform) movement and was an early leader of the clandestine LABOR PARTY that would dominate the ELF after it was reorganized under new leadership. He attended the 1969 Adobha conference, went to Syria to represent the newly formed General Command, and returned to the field in 1971 to attend the ELF's first formal congress, after which he worked in its foreign relations bureau. When the ELF broke up into competing factions in 1982, at the end of the civil war aligned himself with the ELF – United Organization, but he returned to Eritrea immediately after liberation. In 1992, he was appointed governor of Akele Guzai, where he worked until the administrative reorganization of 1995. He died in Asmara in 2004. *(footnote from the book Historical dictionary of Eritrea by Dan Connell and Tom Killion)*

**Saleh Eyay:
Member of a Remarkable
Generation that Was**

By Woldeyesus Ammar (November 14, 2004)



In Blin, Saleh Eyay's mother tongue that he could not use except in his early childhood, there is a saying that goes: "*Sabur girga entgini*". It literally translates: "May the day of praise not arrive[to you]" - i.e. death. It implies that people usually talk about the good part of you when the 'Day of Praise' falls on you. That unwanted day of admiration has come to Saleh and the Palestinian leader on 11 November 2004. And no wonder that a couple of articles eulogized Saleh Eyay within our Eritrean

community as the entire Palestinian nation mourned and praised Saleh's other [friend](#) of the old Beirut days, the late Yasser Arafat. May their souls rest in peace.

Saleh Ahmed Eyay was a member of a remarkable generation of Eritreans who reached adulthood in the late 1950 and early 1960s, at a time when peoples of the Third World were being set on fire in a passion called Revolution for National Liberation. Many Eritreans of different backgrounds and origins were engulfed by that irresistible zeal and devotion for independence that lasted their lifetime – but may probably not continue in the same degree of fervour beyond Saleh's generation and the one that followed it immediately.

It was the political environment that mattered, and matters. Within Eritrea, Saleh Eyay's political environment was special. It was Keren, the town that served as the headquarters of the first and the second biggest Eritrean parties that advocated for independence a decade earlier – i.e. the town that was the headquarter of Ibrahim Sultan's League, and the reformed New Eritrea Party. There was no escape for Saleh Eyay from being [part](#) of "a poisonous generation". And let me first tell you something about this "poison". When he replaced Tedla Bairu as Eritrea's Chief Executive in the summer of 1955, Asfaha Woldemichael arranged a visit to Keren and gathered everybody at the football field to tell them as follows: "This Keren, your Keren, is a cup of poison and the rest of Eritrea is a barrel of water. If we mix the two, it is the cup of poison that transforms the barrel of water to poison and not the other way round. We will see to it that the poison is not mixed with the water". Ibrahim Sultan was around listening to the talk and probably also the then 18-year old Saleh Eyay. But unfortunately for the new Chief Executive, Asfaha Woldemichael and his masters, there was no way for them to stop that "poisonous generation" from cropping up in Keren and other places and gradually spreading to every corner of the country.

Saleh was already a known agitator in Keren before he went to Port Sudan where he met like-minds to continue spreading the 'poison'. On 2 November 1958, eight young Eritreans, among them Saleh Eyay, met at Mohammed Saed Nawd's house at Hay Al-Transit in Port Sudan and formed the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM – *Mahber Showate*) that spread all over Eritrea within a short time. In January 1961, *Mahber Showate*/ELM held its first and last conference in Asmara. Saleh Eyay was one of the 40 Asmara conference participants, who also included: Mohammed Saed Nawd, the ELM co-founder-leader, Yassin Uqda, Adem Melekin, Mohammed Burhan Hassen, Ali Berhatu, Tiku'e Yihdego, Kahsai Bahlbi, Mohammed Omar Akito, Abdulkerim Saed Qasim, Sheikh Saddadin Mohammed, Khiyar Hassen Beyan (a rich and courageous compatriot who hosted the conference in his house) and other well known names.

Saleh Eyay was present almost in every important meeting place or a place of difficulties that had something to do with and about the Eritrean cause – e.g. he even spent one year in the infamous Alem Beqa prison in Addis. He was at Adobaha in 1969

where he reportedly played an important role, and at the first ELF congress at Arr in 1971.

The purpose of my writing is not give details about Saleh's life history which has been sufficiently summarized in a few pieces written in the Eritrean websites recently. However, I worked in the foreign relations office which was under his administration during most part of the 1970s and early 1980s, and wished to agree as a witness to the views expressed by his old colleagues whose comments were published in the websites. The ELF-RC's statement posted in Nharnet.com described Saleh Eyay as "a modest, sociable, generous and at the same time confrontational when the need arose and stubborn in defense of his political convictions". Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, the Speaker of the ELF-RC, said these were the qualities that won Saleh the respect of his comrades during many years of the struggle. Ahmed Nasser of the ELF-NC also confirmed this by saying Saleh was a man of "a unique courage".

Yes, he was a man of unique courage. He was a co-founding leader of the ELM but he had no problem of changing membership to ELF in 1965 when he was convinced that he would do good to the cause for national liberation than by insisting to revitalize ELM. The fear of changing political organization is a malaise that Eritreans suffer to this day. Once separated - EMD or Sagem, Obeleen or whatever - want to remain aloof from the mainstream struggle even when the right moments call for reconciliation and coming together. Saleh's had a unique courage to defy that fear. He was bitterly criticized for standing against the legal leadership of the ELF in 1982 but he was a man of singular decisions, and he went ahead with it, even when it meant separating him from his closest friend, Mohammed Omar Yahya. Again, most of his old comrades surprised to see him going to Asmara after liberation, but he wanted to try to change from within. Unfortunately, and like Yasser Araft, he was not able to achieve success in creating a democratic Eritrea in peace with itself and its neighbours.

I also agree with Herui Tedla Bairu's comment that Saleh was free from narrow feelings of region or religion, except that he, Herui, should have added that Saleh Eyay would not agree with anyone of his old comrades in today's opposition who have been spoiling the political environment and minds of so many innocent compatriots by using unnecessary political language that bred hatred and encouraged mobilization of our people on the basis of ethnicity, region and religion.

May Saleh Eyay's soul rest in peace.

A Historical Account
From A German Historian's
Interviews with Eritrean Figures
Part I
(Edited by Woldeyesus Ammar)

Did you know that:

- *Amanuel Amdemichael, Ethiopia's one time Prosecutor General, and Fitewari Bezabeh, another high official later killed by ELF in the late 1960s as agent, were among the early members of Mahber-Showate/ELM?*
- *A short time before his death in an attempted 'coup' in June 1963, Tedla Uqbit tried to reach ELM through Hedad Karrar and Sheikh Sa'adadin Mohammed?*

*(**Günter Schroeder**, a German historian and political analyst, had been writing about and closely following developments within the Eritrean liberation struggle for over three decades. And not only that: he possesses a rare collection of first-hand information on the Eritrean liberation struggle some of it in the form of interviews with over one hundred Eritreans, most of whom played key roles in the struggle. In the absence of sufficient books authored by those key actors in the struggle, it is gratifying that such a valuable record exists. The other good luck for us is that, unlike others, Günter Schroeder generously shares his documents with any interested Eritreans to use it in their different ways.*

A co-founder of Haraka, Saleh Ahmed Eyay, who passed away recently in Asmara, was one of Schroeder's interviewees in the 1980s. In fact, Schroeder met him in Asmara after liberation. It is with profound gratitude to Günter Schroeder, who permitted the use of this material, that I am sharing with you, readers, major parts of the interviews Schroeder conducted with Saleh Eyay on 10 January 1988 in Kassala, on 24 January 1988 in Khartoum and again on 13 July 1988 in Khartoum. Slight editorial touches were deemed necessary in small parts of the original verbatim text in order to paraphrase one or two long tracts or to edit typographical errors and to standardize spelling of names; of course I remain responsible for any wrong editing or inappropriate deletion. In today's Part I is presented the material mainly dealing with the establishment of the ELM. Sections of the interviews concerned with ELF-related issues like the Eslah Movement, the emergence of 'Kiada Amma', the civil wars and questions raised about the Labour Party will be presented under Part II. Good reading.)

About the Rise and Fall of the Haraka/ELM:

Günter Schroeder: [Mr. Saleh Ahmed Eyay], I would like to start with the Harakat [a-Tahrir al-Eritria] as you were a founding member of Haraka [or the Eritrean Liberation Movement/Mahber Showate]. How did this idea of establishing the Haraka start? What were the preparations and how was it actually formed?

Saleh Eyay: In 1956 I went to Port Sudan in order to proceed to Cairo to continue my education. However, my plans failed and I stayed there and started to work with a company called the African Oil Company.

There was a large Eritrean community residing in Port Sudan at that time - approximately 5,000, most of them students and workers. But other 10,000 [migrant] Eritreans used to visit this port [annually].

In November 1958, Mohammed Saeed Naud invited us for a meeting in his house [beside Naud and Eyay, the other the participants included: Idris Mohammed Hassan, Sheikh Osman Hassan Haj Idris, Osman Mohammed Osman, Yassin Mohammed Saleh Al-Aqda, Mohammed Al-Hansan Osman, Habib Omar Gaas]. We discussed our national case, and we agreed to call our organization Eritrean Liberation Movement. We named ourselves the 'leadership' of this movement and assigned Mohammed Saeed Naud to draft all our thoughts into a programme, and write a structure and a constitution. At the second meeting, he brought the programme. I can say our movement was a progressive movement; Mohammed Saeed Naud himself was a member of the Sudanese Communist Party. He informed us that he had left the party because he could not keep membership in both.

As far as we were concerned, we were looking at our movement to be a national movement for all Eritreans, and not only for the progressive ones. And in our programme, we established that our struggle will be a political struggle organized in secret cells... Within two years the movement was spread to all Sudan with main branch in Port Sudan and branches in Kassala, Khartoum, Gedaref etc. Other branches were formed in Saudi Arabia. [After covering the Sudan], we decided to move the movement to Eritrea. Yassin Al-Aqda and I were asked to go inside Eritrea and form cells. I was assigned to form cells in all of the western provinces from Keren to the Sudanese border. My friend Yassin was assigned to form cells in Asmara, the rest of the highlands as well as in the eastern provinces of Semhar and Dankalia.

Schroeder: *When did you go inside [Eritrea]?*

Saleh Eyay: That was at the end of 1959.

Schroeder: *How did you go about organizing the cells inside?*

Saleh Eyay: I began the mission from Ali Ghidir where I had friends working as teachers and in other professions. That was the main cell for the Gash area and it multiplied itself up to the towns in the vicinity like Galuj and Um Hajer. Then I moved to Keren where I met my friends, teachers, and some old politicians. We formed a leadership for the town and the province of Keren. My friend Mohammed Omar Yahya listed the names of the leadership; they were: myself, full-time political activist; Suleiman Idris Merir, merchant; Ali Karrar and Saeed Shaush, goldsmiths; Mohammed Adem Mohammed Omar Kamil, chief from Beit Maala; Haj Abdulkerim Saeed Kassem, trader; Mohammed Karar, teacher; Omar Haj Idris, cashier at Keren municipality; Afa Usman Derar, 'smuggler', Mohammed Omar Yahya, student; Yassin Mohammed Nur, tailor. The list was correct except that the name Merir should read Merikh.

Schroeder: *Who in the list were from the old parties?*

Saleh Eyay: Suleiman Merikh, Ali Karrar, Abdelkerim, Saeed Shaush, they were from the Muslim League. But Umar Haj Idris, Usman Derar [and others] were my own generation.

Schroeder: *So Saeed Shaush, Abdelkerim, Ali Karrar had been active in the Muslim League?*

Saleh Eyay: Yes, there was some relationship between people who had been active before and the younger generation; the students were a bit more radical.

Schroeder: *How do you see it looking back to Haraka in relation to Jebha?*

Saleh Eyay: The differences between Jebha and Haraka? The leader of Haraka, Mohammed Saeed Naud and all the leadership of Haraka were trying to organize the Eritrean Liberation Movement politically – that is a well organized political opposition against Ethiopia. The ELM was very successful to organizing the Eritrean people [civilians, prisoners, the police..]. But they ways [or the strategy] was very weak. The ELF started directly with guerrilla warfare... The ELM was never against armed struggle as such but we were thinking that the situation was not suitable for such things. But when it exploded, the people accepted it because they were already organized

or at least informed of their cause. Therefore, there was not a problem for the ELF to take over the ELM people to its side.

Schroeder: *In the committees you mentioned there were different professions represented. How was that when you started to organize inside the military and the police? Did you have special cells for policemen or you included them with students or traders?*

Saleh Eyay: The students had their own leadership and the police were guided by policemen. The cells were organized according to the social categories and only at the level of leadership were the different professions coming together. There were also many, many high-ranking persons from the Parliament, from the personnel of the Eritrean Government and Administration. All of them were directly guided by their friends, not by us. They did not know us, but we knew them. They did not know who was guiding them. Everything was secret. Even the leadership in Port Sudan did not know who was leading the organization.

The ELM/Haraka was a new experience but it played a good role in organizing the Eritrean people in cells. Then when the ELF came, the difference between us and the ELF was the question of armed struggle which was very necessary at that time.

Schroeder: *After the ELF started the armed struggle or before, had there been attempts to create a union of the two organizations?*

Saleh Eyay: There were many attempts but they failed. While I was with Haraka, we sent Ali Said Berhatu from Eritrea to the Sudan and Cairo to dialogue for unity between the two organizations... Our contradictions were useful to the enemy and harmful to Haraka and Jebha both of whom had their members imprisoned... In 1968, when I was a member of Jebha, we [Idris Gelaidos, Azien Yassin...] met in Khartoum with Naud and his colleagues. That also failed because Mohammed Said Naud was thinking that Jebha is going to be destroyed and he was waiting for its death. After that, the differences within Jebha increased and Naud joined the PLF formed by Osman Saleh Sabe.



Eritrean Liberation Army (source: Nharnet News)

Schroeder: *In 1960/6, a lot of people were arrested. This means that the Ethiopian security must have penetrated into the cell structure. How did they succeed in that?*

Saleh Eyay: Well, the main thing I want to make clear for you, is that when the ELF was established and started armed confrontations, many of our friends joined Jebha and were no longer with us. All of my old friends in the committees went to Jebha where they took leadership posts and I remained in *Haraka* alone. At that time, there was [another] damaging propaganda against us which said that Haraka people were communists and those in Jebha Muslims. To be called a communist at that time was a very, very bad thing. It was difficult to confront this policy and ELM's position against armed struggle.

I came here [from Eritrea in the Sudan] before I declared myself being a member of ELF. I met Mohammed Saeed Naud and the ELM leadership and I said we should be with the ELF. They refused. After that I met Osman [Sabbe] and Idris Glawdeyos in Kassala in 1965 [to talk about my decision to join the ELF].

Schroeder: *Before you came out to Sudan you had been arrested for some time, hadn't you?*

Saleh Eyay: Yes, I was in prison for 11 months in Keren and then for one year in Alem Beqa of Addis Ababa. Our case was submitted to the High Court and they lacked any evidence against us. Therefore, we were liberated.

Schroeder: *That means you were arrested in 1962 or in 1963?*

Saleh Eyay: In 1962 and in 1963 and then also in 1964 when one Colonel was killed in Keren. They arrested me also I was in Asmara. After one year I came out to the Sudan.

Schroeder: *In 1965 you joined the ELF. But before that there was an attempt by Haraka to build up its own armed force.*

Saleh Eyay: Yes, I came at that time exactly when they built that force and before the clash I came to Port Sudan and I met them and I clarified for them my position and I asked them first to join the ELF and they refused. So I clearly declared from that time on I'm a member of Jebha.

Schroeder: *Some of those who went inside Eritrea [to start armed struggle] with Haraka had been trained in Cuba. How did that connection come about?*

Saleh Eyay: I do not remember the number of those trained in Cuba because at that time I was in prison when they went to Cuba. Many forces played a role in that, mostly the Egyptians because Haraka was friendly with the Communist Parties of the Sudan and Egypt. But after the October Revolution in the Sudan, the position of the Sudanese and the Egyptian Communist Parties was a little bit to give some importance to the ELF. However, the Cubans gave training for about 30 Jebha members in 1966 or 1967, among them Ibrahim Afa, Mohammed Hazeb and many others who are dead.

Schroeder: *Coming back to the situation in Port Sudan before the Haraka was formed, did the large Eritrean community there had some kind of social club or association like the Eritreans in Egypt, Jeddah and Aden?*

Saleh Eyay: At that time, the Eritreans in Port Sudan were mainly [mixing] with the Beni Amer tribe and they were not giving much importance to clubs or associations. Even today, I think, they don't have such associations and separate clubs. But there were one or two football teams. One was having a kind of club within the teashop of Hussein Eyasu in Deim Sawa. This I remember and I was a member of this team. After one year and a half all of them returned to Eritrea or went to Saudi Arabia, so there was no team.

Schroeder: *How did [the first ELM founding group] come together? What was the basis for it? Was the selection made by Mohammed Said on the basis of his knowledge of the individual persons or was there a kind of informal discussion before you started to call people together for the meeting?*

Saleh Eyay: Yes, Mohammed Said had the idea. So he was trying to contact people. And he started that before one year, connecting and contacting all the Eritreans. He was told by some of my friends that I have feelings for the things he was discussing. So he invited me and we discussed those ideas. He was trying to tell me that we can do something, that we should do something, because no one will start it if we wait... (In the interview, Saley Eyay tells in detail where each one of the founding ELM leaders were by 1988).

About ELM leaderships: [After the congress of 1961], key leaders in both the Asmara region and the leadership at the national level consisted of the following persons: Saleh Eyay, Yassin Aqda, Ali Said Berhatu, Khiar Hassan Beyan, merchant; Tikue Yihdego, civil aviation; Abdelkader Blatta, merchant; Kahsay Bahlebi (*wedi libi*) travel agent; Mohammed Saleh Mahmud, journalist; Musa Mohammed Nur, merchant; Mohammed Berhan Hassan, trader-accountant and Ibrahim

Iman, traffic manager of Haji Hassan Company; Mahmoud Ismail, who worked as chief clerk at Public Words; Musa Mohammed Hashim, Saleh Omar, and Fit. Bezabeh, who later became agent of Ethiopia and was killed by ELF in Asmara. (Hedad Karar, Sheikh Sa'adadin and Amanuel Amdemichael were assigned to organize high-ranking government officials.)

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