

Remembering unique Eritreans in contemporary history









*A
short biographical sketch
of
The unsung Eritrean heroines*



Courtesy of <http://www.ehrea.org/>

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We remember the living memories of our fallen heroines of the Eritrean struggle for independence.

By Emnetu Tesfay

The armed struggle of the Eritrean people will remain to be one of the bloodiest events in the history of struggles against colonialism and occupation.

We will forever remember the heroic male and female fighters for the indomitable role they have played, in the cause of our struggles for the freedom and dignity of our people. Their blood has indeed nourished the tree that will bear the fruits of liberation for the victory of all the people of our country.

We remember specially the gallant Eritrean women fighters for their acts of heroism and exemplary contribution in the cause of our struggle for the liberation of our people. Their names belong to a roll call of countless long list of martyrs of our struggle, who volunteered their life's, for the victory of the struggle of the Eritrean people against colonialism and Ethiopian annexation.

The Eritrean women belong to the category of the most rare spices in society, they belong to the category of the few but the better. Their extraordinary acts of heroism will forever decorate the glorious chapters of our history books.

The participation of so many women in the Eritrean struggle for independence was a wonder. The world has not seen so massive number of women from a semi-feudal society to make a colossal transformation by showing their capacity which was never inferior to the male. The Eritrean field has seen such a beautiful united mass of people, a giant wave of hundreds of thousands of freedom fighters against a formidable enemy.

Today as we remember our fallen heroines of the Eritrean revolution we borrow the profound revolutionary words as we say"

Our heroic female fighters never regarded their struggle as an end in itself. They always looked at it as an essential part of the global movement to show the world that they are equal by contributing to the victory of our people against formidable enemy supported at times by both rival super powers.

They were not afraid of the frontline. The Eritrean field was a thriving home for many of our women. Veterans who defied patriarchal restrictions. These are women who sacrificed their families, left their husbands and lovers, abandoned their education and even rejected employment. Theirs was a revolutionary national war of independence, waged against a brutal occupation forces of the Ethiopian monarch and later the Derg. Unlike in many traditional societies where combat actions for women were prohibited, the Eritrean struggle was more open and progressive. Women were subjected to the same training as their male counterparts in line with the revolutionary principle of the armed struggle.

The Eritrean women fighters were legendary. Women fighters' determination for combat had its apparent contribution to a more radical and military zeal of the liberation movement. The success of the liberation struggle was the dynamic involvement of women. The role of women was indispensable. Women saw themselves as fighting for political justice, development, social progress and gender equality.

The commemoration of our female fighters seeks to also remember all our Eritrean women population who took part in various operations behind enemy lines, in refugee camps and in Diaspora. We also pay tribute to those who perished in the prisons of the occupying forces.

Our selfless female fighters, who were the flowers of the revolution, should be remembered not only on the 8th of march but emulate their bravery by documenting their stories and by making it available in libraries and schools all over the country.

We must make sure that the heroic place of our women-ex-and-current fighters-is kept for eternity, and that their revolutionary chronicles are documented.

I conclude with the words of Gloria Steinem.

"The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights"

Birikti Feshaye and Alem Mebrahtu

A Book Review By Tesfaldet Bahlibi 8/18/13: Titled ይጽንዕልኪ / yznHalki Authored by ELF Veteran Birikti Feshaye in Tigrigna.

To those readers lacking in the ability to read Tigrigna language, the title meant to say, if not accurate; "postponing it for a later time." Nevertheless, delving into the contents of the story, the title is very ambiguous with similarity to the book by Michaela Wrong – I Didn't Do It for You. The Book could have been titled reflective to its setups: Place, Time, Characters, Contents and Quality rather than a drop of a term "yznHalki" which I think it is unlikely to attract a glance of potential readers. The author, Birikti, is one of those unsung veteran heroines; member of the Eritrean Liberation

Front urban Fedayn unit (undercover or clandestine) fighters in the Seventies under the directive of a squadron known as # 104 (cento quarto). The "Cento Quatro" was made of selected Tegadelti force specializing in urban warfare. Despite the incoherence of the book's title with its contents, the author's narration is superb presenting her own biography during her stay with the Eritrean Liberation Front, ELF. The book is unique of its kind which walks you through breath taking revelations performed by the author along with her comrade in arms; another unsung heroine a martyr Alem Mebrahtu.

It is hard to believe that these two characters in the book, during their teens to do astonishing operations in revenge for the inhuman murders and excruciating tortures of Eritrean youths in Asmara and other cities inflicted by the Ethiopian killing squad; The Navy. The narration flawlessly entices your attention with accounts from the Fedayn tactics and personifications in Asmara. It also includes stories we have heard all about the nightmares to the Ethiopian soldier caused by the relentless heroism of a single Fedayn fighter - the hero martyr Abraham Tecle Andele. Not only that, you will discover heart wrenching crimes committed by "The Navy" upon innocent civilians in a way a blood thirsty monster may only be able to inflict on humans.

To make the story highly agonizing, Birikti and Alem fell victim of arrest while performing their duties being at a crocodile's jaw. As scary as it may sound, they were trapped into the hands of the Navy by two Eritrean girls who worked for them. They ended up prisoners in the hands of torture-starved souls who did everything available in their discretion to get information out of them. They were jailed separately in two separate locations. It is unthinkable that Birikti finally escaped from her captors.

The dangerous operation strategy she made it her way out is unique by a young girl who grew up in the comfort of Asmara city. You would be amazed to find out about the author's description of her own physical strength and outlook as a young town girl. You can only imagine how a shabby teenager that you may think would not be able to crack an egg's shell was able to handle karate training and climbing by foot the stiff mountain stood separating Barka and highland Melezanai. She resisted every hardship with perseverance while at times crying.

Alem's fate also had another highly treacherous historical twist till she martyred in exile in New York City some years back after liberation. Not mentioned in the book but an eye witness from the Edaga Hamus neighborhood affiliated in friendship with Alem and her family shares story about a visit she made to Alem while she was in prison. She describes Alem's situation emotionally with tears in her eyes. Alem's torture wounds were severely deep to the extent that the skin throughout her entire body was peeling off. She would have been executed if it was not for the involvement of her father who bribed the authorities in charge and secured her release from prison. She was then sent to live in Addis.

Alem, undeterred by all of her extra ordinary troubles continued fighting for her people. She abandoned normal life and went back again to Gedli Jebha in the Meda. Prior to her exile in the USA via the Sudan, she married to Tegadalay martyr Meleka Tekle. The author attempted to touch about the ELF's political quagmires in the years following in 1976 with some margin of variances. However, she made it safely free from swimming into the political torpedo unlike some faulty writers. I would like to conclude the review here congratulating the author for her fabulous contribution in portraying the heroism performed by the urban Liberation

Fighters of the ELF. Especially, the work of the two; Brikti and Alem represents a historic chapter of bravery in honor of the Eritrean women who have proudly fallen for the sake of their people's freedom.

To those who disgrace the fortitude of our living and martyr Tegadelti, are not immune from becoming morally bankrupted. They are the least qualified elements of the Eritrean society to talk about the tragedies facing our youths currently and in the past. God Bless Eritrea Email: fewsilybee@yahoo.com

Mama Zeynab

Eritrean Patriot Mama Zeynab



Eritrean Patriot Mama Zeynab was born in Afabet in 1918. She Joined the EPLF in 1977 and died in 2005 at the age of 87.

Mama Zeinab worked on the front-line. Her role in the Eritrean struggle for independence was so significant that the Ministry of Information documented all her works and presented her publicly as a 'strong, spirited woman, who wasn't held back by tradition.'

- source http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai_news_archive/jan-may11/0468.html

It is important to bear in mind that the issues relating to women's social roles, status and opportunity are closely linked to efforts to build a shared national identity. Here, too, music is often implicated. The following case illustrates this important point. John Sorenson's book is a study not only of Western representations of Africa but of ways these representations are linked to indigenous invention and construction of certain images, histories and identities (Sorenson 1993, 4-5). The cover photograph, taken by the author in 1986, is a photograph of Mama Zeinab when she stayed in a camp for internally displaced people. Today she is known as Eritrea's "national poet" and is revered by the Eritrean people throughout the world. In my experience, the terms for poetry and music are used interchangeably in the region. Hence Mama Zeinab is also vocalist who sings her own poetry and whose songs are disseminated by others. The fact that her photograph, her name, and her title of "poet" appear on a publication available internationally is notable. The decision that she, a Tigre and Muslim woman, is portrayed on the annual EPLF publicity poster in 1988 demonstrates the changing role of women in Eritrean nationalist discourse. (Sorenson 1993,53).

She is a member of the older generation who has lived through the Haile Selassie and Mengistu eras and witnessed the changes within the past 40 years. She is part of a generation that was forbidden to speak out in public. Who she is today and what she represents symbolizes hope for the future.

Women, Music, and "Chains of the Mind" / 259

Eritrean historiography and national myth presents many symbols of female Eritrean valor and individual acts of bravery. The well-worn story of Nebiat, a bar maid who was instrumental in orchestrating the death of a high ranking Ethiopian General, is one example. The muslim Tigrean singer and poet, Mama Zeinab, who worked on the front-line, also featured prominently on the 1988 annual EPLF publicity poster and remains a figurehead today. As she explained " I came from a conservative and traditional religious family background and the EPLF changed me. I used to sing and write poetry for the EPLF, for revolution and liberation..... I am famous because I am a woman....

So significant is Mama Zeinab's role in Eritrean national memory that the Ministry of Information documented all her works and presented her publicly as a strong, spirited woman, (who) is not held back by tradition. In Eritrea heroines such as Nebiat and Mama Zeinab were singled out for public consumption and the large numbers of female fighters were strongly etched into nationalist narrative, despite the hardships female participants faced both during and after the struggle.

Imagining Ethiopia: struggles for history and identity in the Horn of Africa by John Sorenson

A tribute song to the "mother of fighters" Ms. Zainab, who joined the Eritrean revolution in 1977 accompanied by her husband and her two sons. She worked in rear lines inducing and supporting freedom fighters, which qualified her for the title of "mother of fighters" She was characterized uniquely in the field of poetry in Tigre language. Where she was the first female voice in the field during the thirty years of the Revolution.

There are several documentary films produced about the life of activist Zainab Yassin, some of them by the Information office of the revolution, and others s by a number of international mass media, whom was interested in the Eritrean case - one of them, was the Australian TV who made a documentary - about the life of activist Zainab.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfh5a-G-L-E>

Letebrehan Haile 1958-1980

Letebrehan Haile – The embodiment of the Eritrean woman freedom fighter



Letebrehan was born in 1958 in Asmara, Eritrea in the Idaga Hamus neighborhood, to her father Mr. Haile Obgbalidet, and her mother Tsigheweini Mehari. She attended Itege Menen (now Adulis) Elementary School, grades 1-6, grades 7 & 8 at Geza Kenisha School, and 9th grade at John F. Kennedy School. She came from a middle income family and was an exceptional student, known for her creativity and astuteness. It was in 1974 that Letebrehan, very mature at her tender age, established contacts with members of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Army operating in and around Asmara, the Eritrean capital.

When the situation in Asmara worsened in 1975, her family, like many families at the time, decided to leave Asmara and take refuge in the village of Ademizmat. While her older and younger siblings were taken out of Asmara, Letebrehan was left behind by her parents who feared her move to the village would encourage easier and further contacts with members of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Army (EPLF). They feared that she would leave to join the liberation front. But leaving her in Asmara did not deter her burning nationalist desire and not long after her family's departure from Asmara, in 1975 Letebrehan joined the (EPLA) and undertook her initial military training at Adi Gin.

Letebrehan at first served with the fighting forces of Battalion 8 and then at the end of 1975 when the Public Administration Department was established, she was pulled from the fighting forces and transferred to Zagher to serve under Alem Haile (Martyred fighter) to conduct awareness and education campaigns amongst the population at large. It is there that Tegadalay Habte met her. Up until the liberation of Keren in 1977, she continued to work and travel, diligently and selflessly, throughout the areas surrounding Karneshim (ካርነሽም) and Dimbezan (ድምበዛን) organizing, raising the awareness, and arming the population.

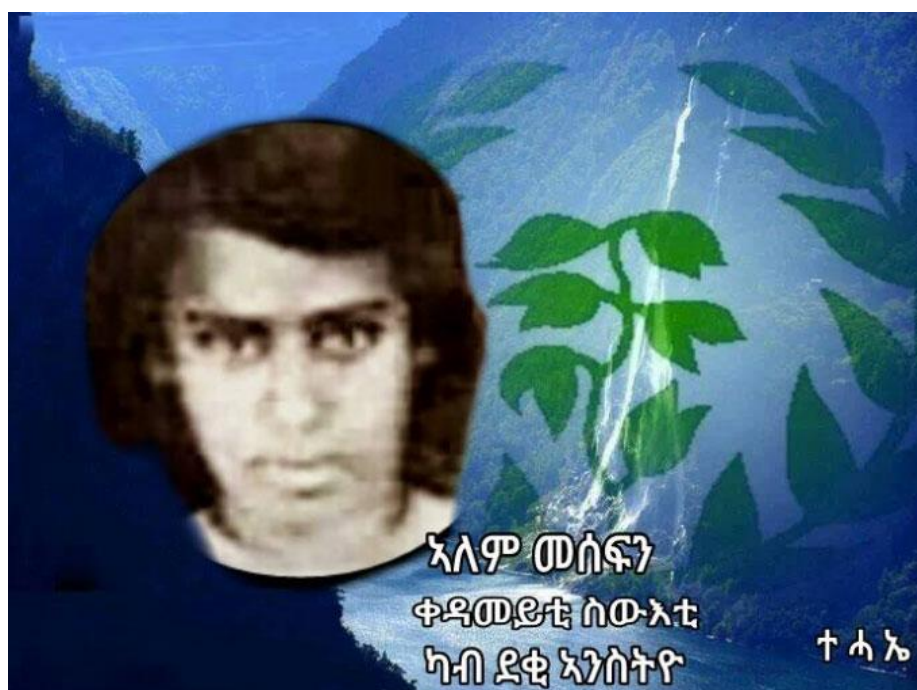
Letebrehan understood the importance of organization, and worked tirelessly to accomplish organizational goals with great attention to detail and commitment, never complaining, always helping others addressing and correcting mistakes, shortcoming, as she went along. Ready, willing and wanting to learn from her comrades, while also sharing her knowledge with

them, to enhance theirs, she was a consummate fighter-one much admired accepted and respected by her peers, and the population she worked with.

Considering her exemplary character and comradeship, in 1977 she was chosen/elected with the greatest number of votes, by her peers in the Department of Public Administration, to participate in the 1st Congress of the EPLF which took place in Nakfa on 23-31 January 1977 and formally set out the policies of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). A program adopted at this first Congress specifically targeted a liberalization of women's rights as well as a broad educational policy for maintaining every language and improving literacy. It was also set out that the boundaries of a liberated Eritrean state would be based on the colonial treaties of Italy

Alem Mesfin

In August 1973, Alem Mesfin joined the ELF in the Akkele-Guzai region. She was martyred in 1974.



“Before 1973, therefore, there were no well studied plans to accommodate women in the ELF. We were given a short 20-day training as *fedayeen* and stayed in the Mensa’e area around Gheleb sewing and repairing clothes for fighters. We also helped in the preparation of food

“Almaz was my *nome de guerre*. My first [real] name, now totally forgotten, was Nebiyat. By end of 1973, we conducted a public meeting in the Mensa’e area and wanted to continue doing so in other parts of the country. There were no sexual advances made on women in those days. However, women were not accepted as fighters before us. We met many girls in the countryside who told us that they were sent back with their hair shaven by ELF units when they asked to become fighters in the 1960s.

“Ghennet and I started talking to women about their rights and duties in the revolution; we addressed in gatherings like village holidays, and at funeral or matrimonial ceremonies. We were later given a two-month course at Debir Sala by Martyrs Hassan Bashumel and Idris Omar. In February 1974, we joined a 13-member women’s committee [that was] already formed in 1973. The Constituent Congress of the Eritrean Women’s General Union [affiliated to the ELF] was held on 27 June 1974 with 40 women participants.

“Talking about other women fighters, Almaz added the following:

In similar way, individual Eritrean women had involved themselves in political activities against foreign rulers as far back as the 40s and late 50s. They took active part in the anti-unionist campaigns as students or co-operated with their brothers who carried clandestine political duties in the ranks of the Eritrean Liberation Movement. Unfortunately, due to circumstances, those contributions have not yet been documented in the annals of history, a worthy subject for future research.

When the Eritrean armed struggle against occupation began in 1961; women had started to play significant role in its advancement. They made valuable contributions inside the homeland, on both the rural, urban arenas and in exile. As their numerical participation expanded the Eritrean women had done crucial work on various levels such as feeding fighters, caring for the wounded in action, gathering intelligence about the enemy, or even taking part in combat duties. One of the first significant role Eritrean women have played, was the role of Sadia Tesfu in the success of the Fidaen operation against a notorious Ethiopian agent called Ibrahim Hamid Nurai in the late 60s in Keren.

“Saadia Tesfu was one of the early and heroic women participants in the Eritrean nationalist cause. In early 1968, Saadia Tesfu agreed with two ELF *fedayeen* to help them liquidate Ali Bekhit (Wed Hayget), a deserter from the ELF who was helping the Ethiopian authorities to arrest many [ELF] cell members in the town [of Keren].

“Ali- Bekhit had terrorized Keren. Many of the town’s inhabitants had some connections with the ELF, and had reason to spend sleepless nights or leave the town to become refugees [in the Sudan]. It was then that Saadia was asked to help. She soon

befriended herself with Ali-Bekhit and had him killed. She left the town with the ELF men but her father was shot dead by the Ethiopians [at the very spot where Ali-Bekhit was found killed]. Saadia spent five months in the field and later went to the Sudan.

“Another early woman participant was Rumana Saleh who helped in the [execution] of another deserter, Abu Nurit; the latter had terrorized the town of Agordat until he was killed by the ELF in January 1975.

“Mana Mussie was an important political cadre of Company 97 who successfully led the Battle of Metekel, and Martyr Haregu G/Egziabeher was a brilliant platoon leader. After 1975, the number of women fighters became very large.”

In Memory of our fallen Heroines

By Tekeste Asghedom

In the three decades of armed struggle to unshackle from the yoke of colonialism, the heroic Eritrean people have dearly paid the price to be independent. The ferocious struggle has found a special place not only in the annals of the Eritrean history but also in the world history of unique achievement of a determined small peasant society against a big enemy supported by rival superpowers, sometimes in collusion. It is such a pride and an honour to be from the flesh and blood of these great heroes and heroines. If one would brood over the heroic martyr's achievement one would feel the conscientious debt one has to pay back in reciprocation in absolute reverence.

The martyrs are there forever lying gracefully draped by the rich seamless garment-earth of their mother land they loved so exceedingly. They did not ask for coffin or expensive shroud but simply the bare but rich soil they fought for. They seem to radiate a message which one would sense as if they are saying, "We here lie in the womb of our mother land having paid the priceless cost of our lives that was expected from us. The measures we have taken were not under any duress but out of an unconditional voluntarism that we have to respond in love for the call of the mother land". We have bravely won our battles and claimed the inevitable victory. It was such a relief to have contributed our shares for this beloved country. We are sure you will agree with us, they seem to question to the living, that we have discharged our responsibility so superbly.

Eritrean women are living in legends of unparalleled heroic stories across the globe. They fought on equal basis with their male counterparts to liberate their country from colonial forces and are actively engaged in safeguarding the sovereignty of their country.

In writing about Eritrean heroines, however, one always worries about translating their bravery into matching words. What was most captivating about their wartime stories was their dedication to the bigger national goal-liberating their country-and consequently their equality. In all their activities they demonstrated that they were equally capable and competent as their male counterparts. A glimpse of the pre and post-independence Eritrean reality reveals numerous instances of such heroism and unwavering participation of women, which is hard to conceive for outsiders let alone believe it. Under the EPLF women were not only given the opportunity to participate in areas that were naturally reserved for men, but also to fight for their rights through participation.

Appendix: Random pictures of female fighters during the armed struggle to make Eritrea an independent country





Remember the women who have been martyred fighting.
Remember the women who gave birth while fleeing from their homes, and those women who have been born and have grown up fighting for the liberation of our country.



“Rest in peace “

A wakeup call

Many countries in the world honor their heroes and commemorate them eternally by erecting statues, naming streets, parks, schools, universities and all sorts of institutions in their names. Eritrea has failed to remember its heroes in all spheres of life and fields including statesmanship, military, scholarships, arts, literature, religion, music and sports. It would be too long to list all the great Eritrean personalities from antiquity to the present. Even the heroes of the last 50 years who have not been recognized and honored are very many.

I believe many will agree with me that Eritrea has many amazing individuals in history who have done something unique to their country in the field of politics, culture, education, sport etc, which we need to remember them for what they have done. It is disheartening though not to see biography books of Eritreans in the library shelves. Lately I have decided to open a section in my website that will be dedicated to the biography of individual Eritreans from all walks of life in history (www.emnetu.com).

To start with I have randomly established a list of possible candidates. I therefore ask you all to put additional names to the list and return it to me. The list has to accommodate only individuals who have passed away. In other words we will concentrate only on post mortem biographies. I will update the list when I hear from you. The list will remain open all the time for additional names.

If you are positive about this idea and you have the time I would challenge you all to write biographical sketch or find individuals who can be interested to write a biography on any in the list. If you come across anyone who has access to information but not ready to write, you can ask him/her to supply the information to me in any format (paper, diskette, gramophone dish, cassette, videos, photographs etc) so that I can send it to the one who is interested to write.

The size of the file is not important at all. What is important is remembering them and trying to document their history before it disappears all together. The size will be determined only by the amount of information available on these individuals. Of course the individuals in the list must have done something positive to the cause of our country or to the well being of our people and our culture.

Emnetu Tesfay

Biographical sketch of the unsung Eritrean heroines