

Remembering Eritrean heroes in contemporary history

A Short Biography
of
Sheik Abdelkadir Kebire



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Early life and personal data

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 Zeqlul 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.

Activities during the British administration

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 founded 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.



The Hamasien hotel was at that time the headquarters of the British administration.

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.



Mounted patrol of the Eritrean Police force during the British administration

On the 3rd of December 2009, Winta Weldeyesus writes the following analysis on the British administration of Eritrea. At the beginning when the British occupied Eritrea, the people of Eritrea accepted them as their liberators and thought that they will get their promised freedom, but what the British later did was completely against the wishes of the Eritrean people. The British retained the Italian system of racist administration and allowed all Italian officials to keep their position. The British did not even try to consider the needs of the Eritrean people. As a result of World War II, unemployment, hunger and various forms of diseases spread throughout the country. The settlement of Italian recruits (Ascaries) and laborers led to the increase in the number of city dwellers and with the support of the British, the Italians resumed their crimes against the natives.

As a result, Eritreans were compelled to get together and form associations to solve the prevailing problems of food, health care, and the discriminative policies of the colonizers. Majority of the members of such associations were religious and traditional leaders, businessmen and 'Meslenetat' (native administrators).

On May 5, 1941 an association known as "Mahber Fikri Hager" was established with 12

administrative elders, six of which were followers of Christian faith and the other six Moslems. These notable elders included, Fitewrari Gebremeskel Weldu, Dejazmat Hassen Ali, Blata Demsas Weldemicaheal, Haji Emam Musa, Berhanu Ahmedin. Ato Weldeab Weldemariam and Fitewrari Gebremeskel Weldu were chosen to be the acting Chairman of the association.

The British Colonizers Plan Vis-a-Vis the State of the People

In the years 1942-43 Germany and Britain were fighting a war in Libya and Eritrea was the main base for the British, as a result there were some progressive activities in the country. To mention some, there was aircraft Machinery Company in Gura'e, large stores and car repairs shops were constructed in Ginda'e and Asmara. There was also a large workshop for the war ships in Massawa. There were large plantations for fruit and vegetable for the soldiers and large companies were also constructed by the British to full-fill their demands during the war.

After the war in Libya was over, Britain shifted its base to other colonies and transferred out most of the modern manufacturing companies from Eritrea.

Some of the major factories dismantled by the British colonizers were:-

1. Machineries worth of 20 million USD in the stores of Gura'e, Ginda'e and Mai Habar were exported to other countries and some of the materials were even sold to foreign countries.
2. One of the docks in the Massawa port was sold to Pakistan.
3. 16 large ships were sold to rich people from all over the world.
4. 500 tanks of oil were stolen from Hetemlo.
5. 400 residential houses in Zula were completely destroyed without any particular reason or cause.
6. The British army looted one factory in Marsa Fatma.
7. The railway that was supposed to extend from Agordet to Massawa was destroyed and the rails were removed and sold.
8. Majority of the factories built and functioning during the Italian colonization were either closed or exported to foreign countries.

What Prompted the British to Destroy the Modern Development in Eritrea?

From the very beginning the purpose of British's occupation was to expand its colony by joining regions of Barka, Sahel with Sudan and while the rest of the country would be left to join Ethiopia.

To realize its plans, Britain began to lobby that Eritrea could not sustain itself economically as a country, while destroyed every major economic activity in the country to validate its claims. As a result of Britain onslaught on Eritrea's economy, many of the people become victims of the unemployment and hunger. To make matters even worse, the British rule in Eritrea became very oppressive and brutal.

All the government employees were Italians, business and trade were dominated by Italians and Jews residing in the country and as an outcome of all this number of unemployed youngsters in the country skyrocketed. The Eritrean people could not even demonstrate openly their opposition due to suppressive measures taken by the colonial administration.

There were similar problems rising in the rural part of the country, particularly in the lowlands. The main reason for the chaos and instability in the lowlands were the resistance upraised between the Shemagle (local leaders aided by the colonizers) and the local residents of the region especially in the Tigre ethnic group.

In the highlands there were the scarcity of land for farming; the British confiscated majority of the land for plantation. And these created riots as a result many plantations owned by the Italians were burned and dams were destroyed. Some of the native residents become outlaws and migrate to the lowlands, and their migration created another chaos and riots. There were chaos, instability and riots in every part of the country. In general in the year 1941-45 the people of Eritrea were not stable and the people was freedom hungry but there was no organized force that able its resistance put in action.

The Division of "Mahber Fikri Hager"

As mentioned at the beginning of this article "Mahber Fikri Hager" was established to fight for the freedom of the people of Eritrea but the association didn't have the ability or the capability to win the dreams of the people. And in 1943-44 the members start dividing among themselves; some of them were supporting the idea of free Eritrea where some say unity with Ethiopia.

Starting from the defeat of Italians in the region, Ethiopia was claiming Eritrea as part of its governance and the main aim of the claims was to have the access to the sea and control the ports of Asseb and Massawa. In order to achieve its agenda Ethiopian rulers were organization Eritreans. At first those who were asking for unity with Ethiopia were Eritreans that migrated to Ethiopia to

escape the brutality of Italians and some were slaves and servants of Italians who went in exile to Ethiopia with the defeat of Italy in the region. Ethiopian rulers start organizing those Eritreans and make them preach the people of Eritrea to accept union with Ethiopia. Some of those were Asfaha Weldemicheal, Dejazmat Gebremeskel Habtemariam, Blata Dawit Qkbazgi and Blata Keflezgi.



Addis Abeba resident unionists (source: Jelal Yassin)

The others that support the union with Ethiopia were Mesafenti (traditional leaders) and religious leaders in the highlands. The Italians crowned Abune Markos as a Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and when the Italians take the land of the church for plantation he ask the help of the British to return their land but the British didn't take any effort to return the land of the church. Later the Ethiopian rulers promise to return the land if the patriarch preach the people about unity with Ethiopia and he did so to keep the end of his deal.

The others supporting the union with Ethiopia have the same reason, they all have one or other thing confiscated by the Italians so in order to return their belonging they look up for the support of Ethiopia and the rulers of Ethiopia come with the theme of "land is for the native" and it make them achieve the trust and support of the people in their agenda to unite Eritrea with Ethiopia.

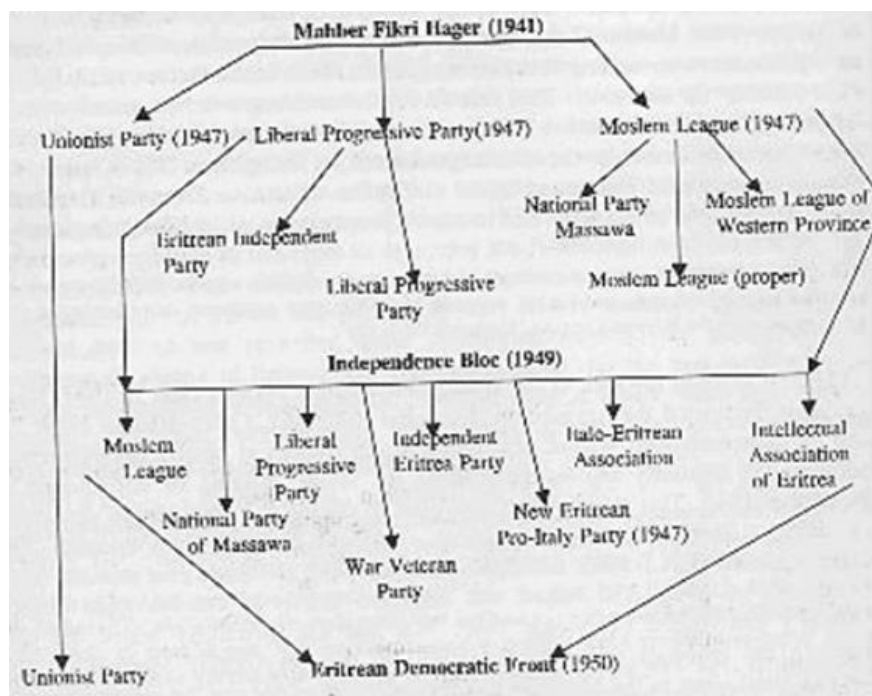
At the end of the year 1944, "Mahber Fekri Hager" changed its name to " Mahber Fekri Hager: Eritrea with Ethiopia" or " Mahber Hebrer" and this was done mainly by Abune Markos, Dejazmat Beyene

Beraki, Blata Demsas Weldemicheal, Fitawrari Haregot Abye and Dejazmat Araia Wasie.

Abune Markos start teaching and preaching that Ethiopia is the one and only Christians country and

start creating differences among the people of Eritrea and as a result concerned nationalists start organizing another better association where both Christians and Moslems work together for the freedom of the country. One of the main organizers of this latter movement was Ibrahim Sultan.

Ibrahim Sultan was born in 1916 in Keren. He was from the Tiger ethnic group and had faced many crimes and brutalities committed by the traditional leaders of the country. At first this resistance was just against the “Shemagle” but later it also becomes against the Italians. The Italians imprisoned him and he was one of those that were teaching the people of the country not to be divided based on religious believe.



Proliferation of Eritrean political parties
Source: Redie Bereketeab, 2000, p.148

Another known resistance leader was Abdul kader Kebire. He was born in 1902 around the coastal area of the Red Sea. Though Abdul kader Kebire was one of the founders of “Mahber Fekri Hager” but when the association starts diverting its aim to the unity with Ethiopia, he with his two friends left “Mahber Fekri Hager”. Dejazmat Hassen Ali was one of those that opposed unity with Ethiopia. He was born in 1883 in the former Serai district in a place called Adi Hanso. He was famous for his intelligence and smart advices to the people and was respected by both the Moslem and Christian population. Another opposition leader from the highlands was Rasi Tesema Asmerom. He was born

in 1870 and was known for his justice and strength. In 1943-44 he was teaching the people that they shouldn't join the unionists. Woldeab weldemariam was also another fighter that opposes the



A unionist party meeting

union with Ethiopia and was born in 1905 in the former Seraie district in a place called Adi Zarna. At the times of the British colonization, he was the editor of the weekly newspaper in the country and before that he used to be a teacher. He was advocating that the people of Eritrea should be proud of his identity and cultural values and was against any form of colonization. His speech and talent of the Tigrinya language was excellent and many people start listening and accepting him as a result he was hated by both the Ethiopian rulers and “Mahber Fekri Hager”.

In 1944 all the above mentioned freedom hungry Eritreans gathered together and start preparing for forming a new association that fight for the freedom of the Eritrean people. And one day Ibrahim Sultan, Weldeab Weldemariam, Dejazmat Abrha Tesema, Dezamat Hassen Ali, Dejazmat Omer Sefaf and Berhanu Ahmedin meet and swear in the holy Korean and after that they went to Dejazmat Abrha's house and swear on the holy Bible that they will not be separated by any religious believes and will not allow any foreigner to interfere with their struggle for the independence of the people of Eritrea. At the end of their meeting they form a new association known as “Mahber Eritrea N' Eritreans” (Eritrea is to the Eritreans).



Some of the founders of Islamia. (source: Jeberti.com)

Waala Biet Giorghis by Sami Mehari, November 2002

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.

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 threat on his life 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.

This week marks the 56th anniversary of an important conference that was convened in the outskirts of Asmara on **Sunday 24 November 1946** on Eritrea's emerging political trends of that period. The conference, better known as *Waala Biet Giorgis*, was the brainchild of the independence-minded patriots like Woldeab Woldemariam who wanted to reconcile differences among the various trends by agreeing on middle ground. The elite of the time expected much from that early Eritrean political gathering. Unfortunately, Ethiopia, working through Eritrean collaborators, sabotaged it. In short, the *Waala* forgot its main agenda on the future of the country and, instead, was diverted to a none-issue when Tedla Bairu, totally a newcomer to the group, provoked discussion on the 'origin' of Woldeab Woldemariam and questioned Woldeab's right to talk for Eritrea. Believe it or not, that was all what the *Waala* discussed before it was disrupted by unionist hooligans armed with knives and pistols.

Thanks to two valuable sources - Alemseged Tesfai's *Aynfelale* and Jordan Ghebremdhin's *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* - we have some historical record on that sad, yet important, event in modern Eritrean history. Based on those sources, I will try to give readers a summary of *Waala Biet Giorgis*, which acquires added significance today as we read about the recent meeting of the Alliance in Addis Ababa and also as we think of the proposed National Conference for the Eritrean opposition.

In 1941, i.e. soon after the defeat of Italy and the establishment of the British in the territory, Eritrean elite of the day formed the [Eritrean] Patriotic Association (some writers prefer to call it 'Party of Love of Country'). At the start, people were in genuine search for their destiny. The question: 'what should the future of Eritrea be?' was in the minds of all politically conscious Eritreans. A moderate intellectual called Gebre-Meskel Woldu chaired the [Eritrean] Patriotic Association. Abdulkadir Kebire was his deputy.

By 1946, the group consisted of two major contending political trends that needed reconciliation. One was a faction calling for Eritrea's association with Ethiopia and another

faction advocating a separate status. Those who wanted 'association' with Ethiopia were led by Gebre-Meskel Woldu and the 'separatists' by Abdulkadir Kebire.

The differences between the two factions were sharpened following a number of domestic and international events and incidents that can be summed as follows:

1. **Ethiopian Liaison Office in Eritrea:** In March 1946, Ethiopia appointed a Liaison Officer in Eritrea by the name of Col. Nega Haile Selassie. His duty was to instigate differences among Eritreans, mainly on religious lines, and create a unionist movement like the 'Society for the Unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia' that the Emperor's government created in Addis Ababa a year earlier. During May-July 1946, anti-Arab, anti-Islam and anti-Italy demonstrations were staged in Eritrea. Lives of individuals became under big threat by Ethiopian agents. The British tried to maintain public security in Eritrea through what was called Sudanese Defense Force (SDF). While doing its job, the force was projected by Col. Nega and his team as "enemy of Christian Eritreans".
2. **Tor'a-Tsenadegle Conflict:** On 15 August 1946, the Tor'a and Tsenadegle conflict erupted in Akele-Guzai; 11 Tor'as were killed and 40 wounded. Another three were killed from the side of Tsenadegle. Land dispute was the cause of the conflict although people did not stop associating it with religion.
3. **The 28 August 1946 massacre in Asmara:** It was Eid day, and members of the SDF were playing cards near Aba Shawl. A simple scuffle with a young Eritrean "Christian" resulted in the death of one Sudanese soldier. The SDF interpreted it as an open attack on the SDF by the unionists. A few hours later, 70-armed Sudanese soldiers went down town Asmara and massacred people in "Christian" quarters of the city; 46 persons were killed and 70 wounded. Col. Nega capitalized on the incident. The Coptic Church found a rallying cry for immediate union with Ethiopia, then claiming to be "protector of Christian Eritreans". Eritrean Moslems had nothing to do with the SDF and that incident but the massacre was taken as a "Moslem-Christian" conflict.
4. **Paris Peace Treaty:** On 25 September 1946, the Paris Peace Treaty of the major powers agreed to dispossess Italy of its former colonies. The peoples in the former Italian territories

would be asked their future preferences. Soon after the Paris meeting, the British authorities allowed Eritreans to form political movements and parties.

5. **Assassination Attempts:** During September 1946, bombs were lobbed at leading ‘separatist’ figures in Asmara. Bombs missed Degiat Hassen Ali and Haj Imam Mussa, both prominent leaders of the independentist faction.

Woldeab Woldemariam and his friends saw the looming danger. Many members of the Patriotic Association (which was still Eritrean in aim) thought that there was still time for them to iron out differences within the group by adopting a common platform that they can be reached through political compromises. The factions accepted the slogan of ‘dialogue, unity and democracy’. Even Fit. Gebre-Meskel Woldu agreed with Woldeab and others on putting conditions on Ethiopia before any association was entered to. The first meeting for adopting an agenda was held on 16 November 1946. It is said that a 12-point item agenda was accepted for the *Waala* suggesting the idea of an autonomous Eritrea, which would enjoy civil liberties like freedom of press, religion, association, formation of parties and settle the issue of languages. The British authorities were advised on the matter, and granted permission for the main *Waala* to take place in Biet Giorgis as scheduled.

Ethiopia, which knew what was going on in the [Eritrean] Patriotic Association, was angered. Col. Nega, who was in Addis on reporting mission after the August massacre, hurriedly returned to Asmara together with a representative of the unionist society in Addis Ababa. It was claimed that they returned to Asmara carrying bags of “money and bombs”.

Unionists Meet, Tedla Bairu Emerges

Upon his return to Asmara in the eve of the *Waala*, Col. Nega held an emergency meeting with supporters in which Fit. Gebre-Meskel was harangued to humiliation and suspended from leadership of the unionist faction within the [Eritrean] Patriotic Association. He was asked to renounce his agreement with the ‘separatists’. The meeting with Col. Nega agreed to stop the *Waala* from taking place. But if convened, it was no more Gebre-Meskel Woldu but Tedla Bairu who was asked by Col. Nega to lead the team. Many observers, including Kennedy Trevaskis, recorded that even the meeting of the two factions for formulating the agenda might not have taken place if Col. Nega were in Asmara on 16 November 1946.

The Main Waala, 24 November

By 10 a.m. of the fixed date, some 30 delegates from the faction of the supporter of independence arrived at the meeting place led by Degiat Hassen Ali of Meraguz. Other key figures included Woldeab Woldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan and Berhanu Ahmedin. The bigger delegation of the unionist faction in the Patriotic Association, which included many youth, arrived late. Beside the new star, Tedla Bairu, other key figures in the delegation included Degiat Beyene Beraki, Blatta Demsas W/Michael and the humiliated Fit. Gebre-Meskel Woldu.

The atmosphere of the gathering was so tense that no one could take it for what it was originally planned: a meeting for peace, unity and reconciliation. It was far from that.

First to speak was Bl. Demsas W/Michael who said: “You callers for independence, you are mistaken. When one talks to parents, one does not pose conditions. We Eritreans cannot make conditions to be united with Ethiopia. We just unite”. The subdued Fit. Gebre-Meskel also spoke against “conditional union” and against all what he previously agreed in the 12-point agenda for the *Waala*. The independentist then knew that the whole thing has been reversed and that there was little to be done at this long-awaited *Waala*.

The other speaker was Tedla Bairu who eloquently presented the unionist version but with threats of action against those who would dare to try to stop them. He immediately diverted the attention of the meeting to the ethnic origin of Woldeab, and finger-pointing at Woldeab said: “You are from Tigrai; why do you meddle in Eritrean affairs by sometimes calling for trusteeship and at other times talking about conditional union with Ethiopia”. Woldeab retorted in the strongest terms possible. He expressed pride for his advocacy of a better solution for Eritrea to which he said he belonged through long and joint history. During those heated exchanges, the unionist hooligans started to physically harass the ‘separatists’. Woldeab was taken away in a car to Adi Nefas where he spent the whole day to avoid any head-on coalition with the thugs.

Moves for reconciliation and dialogue between the two factions were stopped. This was the end of the [Eritrean] Patriotic Association. It was replaced by the Patriotic Association for the

Union of Eritrea with Ethiopia, and members of the latter name became literal agents of the state of Ethiopia. It was time for the independentists to start establishing their own political parties.

The visible humiliation reflected in the face of the once great leader Fit. Gebre-Meskel Woldu was a sad surprise at the *Waala*. The other major surprise was the sudden emergence of Tedla as a leader. He was a British civil servant until only a few weeks before the convening of the *Waala*. Woldeab himself wrote: “No one knew how and from where this Tedla came to the unionist side”. But Tedla retorted defending his past service to Ethiopia: “May the Lord reward me and my children for all what I have done for Ethiopia”. Jordan Gebremedhin wrote in his 1989 book:” Tedla Bairu made his entry into unionist politics preceding *Waala Beit Giorgis* and acquired fame in his zealous sabotage of the *Waala*’s efforts at peace and reconciliation”. Col. Nega thought that Tedla was a lightweight politician in Eritrea of the day because of his lack of domestic support. ‘Not a full-blooded [Habesha] neither a Copt nor a Moslem, Ato Tedla Bairu found himself in a weak and precarious position’, Col. Nega thought.

Waala Beit Giorgis was the first failed attempt by Eritreans of different viewpoints to solve political problems through dialogue. However, that first attempt was thwarted by Ethiopia’s interference in Eritrean affairs. That interference would not have succeeded without the collaboration of some Eritreans, especially the intellectuals of the day.

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The Issue of Eritrea at United Nations Assembly by Winta Weldeyesus

The people of Eritrea were happy about their question being brought before the UN Assembly for they believed that their right to decide their own fate would be protected. The Eritrean people were to learn soon that the UN was not particularly interested in their legitimate rights or questions.

Abdelkadir Kebire

In April 1945, 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 Islamya (Islamic League), but on the eve of the day they were supposed to depart for New York, Abdelkadir Kebire was murdered in Asmara by Ethiopian agents. Abdelkadir Kebire had struggled for Eritrean independence of the country since 1941, and had been working as the head of the Al Rabita Al Islamya. He was respected among his fellow nationals and many grieved for his death.

British and Italian Ploys against Eritrean Freedom



Eritrea at the centre of big power rivalry
(Source: Wikipedia.org)

After their arrival in the United States, the representatives of all Eritrean political parties except that of Mahber Hibret (Unionist Party) told the UN Assembly that they want freedom.

Despite this fact however, Italian and British representatives to the UN Assembly hatched out a ploy to divide Eritrea into two different regions. The plan was to join the former regions of Barka, Sahel and Senhit with Sudan, and Kebesa, Semhar and Denkalia with Ethiopia. While nationalists like Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan strongly opposed the plan, the Ethiopian Imperialist government and the Mahber Hibret representative Tedla Bairu, accepted the proposed plan. Britain and Italy presented their proposal to the Assembly but the plan was rejected and Eritrea was spared from being divided in

two. Although the Eritrean people were glad that such a plan was rejected it became clear to them that the UN was not particularly interested in their rights. Angered by the readiness of the Ethiopian rulers and Mahber Hibret to accept divided parts of the country, the Eritrean people realized the need for avoiding trivial divisions along ethnic, regional and religious lines and form a strong unity.

Hence, while they were still in New York, Shiekh Ibrahim Sultan and others like him took the initiative to form a united political party that encompasses all the pro-independence parties and called it the Eritrean Independence Block. Meanwhile, the United Nations sent another fact-finding committee from five countries to review the desires and wishes of the Eritrean People.

“Ketsri N’atsnet Ertra” (Eritrean Independence Block)

After the failed ploys maneuvered by Britain and Italy, leaders of Shara Italy (Pro-Italy), met with the leaders of a movement called “National Moslem Organization”, (Hagerawi Islamawi Mahber) and Mahber Ertra N’Ertrwyan(The Eritrea for Eritreans Movement) and decided to work jointly in order to liberate the country and overcome the ploys of the British and the government in Ethiopia. As a result they agreed to join the Ketsri N’Natsnet Ertra (the Eritrean Independence Block) and jointly fight for the country’s independent.

The news of this agreement among the leaders of the movements reached the Homeland and people accepted the agreement gladly, since there was no doubt that once the people were united, they can succeed in getting their independence. After the return of the representatives from US, the leaders of the organizations held a meeting in Dekemhare, and Ketsri N’atsnet Ertra, was established officially and Hanti Ertra or United Eritrea become the official mouthpiece newspaper of the movement. In the meeting, Ra'as Tessema Asmerom, an 80-year-old father said: “We are trying to build a united and independent Eritrea governed by intellectual nationals that are able to create a crime-free country”.

On February 10, 1950, another meeting was held in Dekemhare where Ketsri N’atsnet Ertra leaders were elected. Ra'as Tessema was elected as the president and Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan as the general-secretary of the movement. Mr. Wolde'ab Weldemariam was elected as head of Hanti Ertra and vice-secretary general of the movement. In the meeting Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan called all Eritrean youth to participate in this movement and liberate the country.

In a speech he delivered at this meeting, the Secretary-general, Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan said: "All of you young people, if Eritrea gets its independence you will have a better life and if not you will be pursuing an atrocious life. To protect your dignity and legacy, I call on you to join this movement."

Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan's call to the youth to join the movement reached every part of the country and many people particularly youngsters joined the movement; some even changed membership from Mahber Hibret to Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra. The British administrators in Eritrea also accepted that 75% of the Eritrean people support Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra.

As a result of the campaign by Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra many members of Mahber Hibret joined the former by organizing themselves under a new movement called, Selfi N'natsnet Ertra or Progressive Liberal Party.

After the ploys of Britain and Italy failed, the United Nations' Assembly sent a fact-finding committee composed of members from five countries to Eritrea. The main aim of the committee was to find out the desires of the Eritrean people. The committee reached Asmara on November 9, 1950.

By the time that the fact-finding committee arrived in Asmara, the strength of the movement of the Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra was getting stronger and the government in Ethiopia and members of Mahber Hibret began to grow anxious as a result of this development and thus enhanced their ploys to weaken and destroy the movement. Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Markos, declared that people against unity with Ethiopia would be expelled from the church and started banning those people from getting burial, baptism, Eucharist and worshipping services. They even resorted to threatening the people. Moreover, bandits and terrorists backed by the government in Ethiopia began killing and looting properties of the leaders of the liberation movements. On February 4, 1950 the bandits made a fourth attempt to assassinate Mr. Woldeab Weldmariam and there were several other attempts on other various individuals.

One of the major incidents maneuvered by the bandits and Mahber Hibret took place on February 2, 1950. On this particular day one of the leaders of Al Rabita Al Islamyia was murdered and to make things worse, at the funeral ceremony members of Mahber Hibret exploded bombs around the civilians. As a result, a number of Muslims gathered together and took counteractive measures against the atrocity committed by Mahber Hibret and this created chaos in the city that went on for six days. The unrest even escalated to a religious difference among the people and numerous people died and were wounded.

The fights that erupted among the Moslems and Christians of the country were put to a halt by initiatives taken by religious leaders from both faiths. They even promised themselves that they will never avenge each other, and put flowers at the graves of those who died in the chaos. There was a complete agreement and peace among the followers of both faiths.

Despite the ploys and support of the Ethiopian government, Mahber Hibret was a failure. However, British and Ethiopian governments kept on advocating that Moslems and Christians in Eritrea can't live peacefully together, citing the unrest in February as an evidence.

The Division of Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra

The primary objective of Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra was to work against the Ethiopian government and the British administration who were working towards dividing the country into two.

As a result, the British administration in the country began pressuring Al Rabita Al Islamiya (Islamic League), as a result of which the movement divided into two. Those supported by the British established a new movement known as Al Rabita Al Islamiya of Me'rabawi Kola (Islamic League of the Western Lowlands), claiming to fight for the liberation of Western Lowlands. Both the government of Ethiopia and Mahber Hibret supported the aim of the new movement.

And later the British administration in the country began working towards dividing Mahber Ertra N'Ertrawyan. The son of the president of the organization met with Emperor Haileselassie of Ethiopia and the Emperor agreed to respect Eritrea's freedom and promised to make Tigrinya and Arabic the official languages of the country. The Emperor also promised to allow the society to keep its cultural and traditional norms. As a result, Dejazmat Abraha, Ra'as Tessema's son, and some of their followers believed the promise of the Ethiopian Emperor and left Mahber Ertra N'Ertrawyan or the Liberal Progressive Party and established a new party called Liberal Unionist Party and began advocating for unity with Ethiopia.

The British administration in the country and the government of Ethiopia together weakened Ketsri N'natsnet Ertra, but the desires of the people in the country didn't change. The Eritrean people as always wanted freedom.


Kebire: ideas and achievements



"ዕላማ ከብሪ እዩ...ዋጋ ከብሪ ድማ ህይወት እዩ!"

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** became 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-Hussein 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 ዓርኮብ ካብ ዝጻሕፍዎ ደብዳቤ</p> <p>እቲ ዝለዓለ ወድ ሰብ ዝውንኖ፡ ክቡርን ዋጋ ኣልቦን ደሙ ኢዩ-እዚ ድማ፡ ኣብ ምዕራፋት ናይቲ ንፍትሒ ዝካየድ ኣህጉራዊ ቻልሲ፡ ሓንቲ ገጽ ንምጽሓፍ ኢዩ ከኸፈል። እቲ ዕላማ ፍትሒ ምጥባጥ ወይ እናፈተንካ ምማት ኢዩ። ኩነታትና እዚ እዩ። ዕላማና ኸላ ፍትሒ እዩ።</p> <p>ዓብደልቃድር ከቢረ፡ ኣብ ተመሳሳሊ ደብዳቤ</p> <p><i>Source: Aynfelale by Alemseged Tesfay</i></p>
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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.



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

Source: 2000 nation of jeberti

Every now and then the world is greeted by a hero, a unique human being who more than anyone else possesses qualities of courage, loyalty, resourcefulness, charisma, and most of all, selflessness. An ordinary individual with whom comes a great story that paints the picture of our history. A History that is so unique in nature and part of the present life of all Eritreans. However, when we reflect on our history we often tend to focus on just one portion. It seems for most people the Eritrean history begins after the international community decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1951 and Idris Awate fired the first gunshot that sparked the Eritrean Struggle for Independence on September 1, 1961. What about the events that led to that day? What about the people who fought not only in the trenches but within the city itself, surrounded by enemies?

September 1 marked the beginning of the struggle in the international forum, but for Eritrea and people like Mr. Yohannes Tseggai, the struggle had begun long before. Mr. Yohannes was among several of the youth at the time, who understood the idea of Free Eritrea was achievable but indeed

a challenge. He started fighting for a vision „Netsa Eritrea“ way before we as a country decided that raising arms was our means of liberation. In a country oppressed and possessed by outsiders, in an environment where the natives were never allowed to be elevated to a certain degree of education, he used the small window of education he could get by attending “Scuola Vittorio di Asmara,” while at the same time working as a writer with British information services in the 1940s. Like many of our founding fathers, he too was bold in the pursuit of more knowledge, never fearing to follow truth and reason to whatever results they led, because he knew that in order to achieve the vision “Netsa Eritrea” he would have to equip his mind with knowledge. His whole life as a patriot was not based on his index trigger finger but his intelligence and his ability to write. It’s often fascinating and motivating to see how the youth at that time always walked on the edge of the precipice, fascinated by how close they could travel without losing their balance.

“The secret of happiness is freedom.

Throughout history we’ve seen that only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. After the collapse of the Italian government in the 1940’s,

the British took over Eritrea, which resulted in the formation of several Eritrean nationalist movements such as, “Mahber Fikri Hager,” “Eritrea Ni Eritrawian,” and “Al Rabita Al Islamya,” with the idea of consolidating the country as one. Regardless of the different organizations, the Imperial power of Haile Selassie worked tirelessly in an effort to destabilize the situation in Eritrea and annex it to Ethiopia. However, the majority of the Eritrean population was behind the idea of an independent state of Eritrea. Patriots such as Ras Tesema Asmerom, Weldeab Weldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan, Abdelkadir Kebire, and Degiat Hasen advocated long and hard for unity within the country. Their ideals gave a way to a dream of an independent state of Eritrea, diminishing the efforts of the imperial power to conquer and exploit its people.



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

Imposition of federation and the start of armed struggle

After Italy, Germany and Japan signed the tripartite pact in September of 1940, which became known as the Axis alliance; Italian East Africa including Eritrea became a target for the Allied forces. In 1941 the British forces moved from the Sudan into Western Eritrea, and

after a bloody battle for the strategic town of Keren, which was concluded in the defeat of Italy on 18 March 1941, Asmara the Capital fell in the hands of the British on 1 April 1941. This was the end of Italian occupation of Eritrea. Thus Eritrea entered a new phase in its history - The British Administration 1941 - 1952.

It was this period which was rather more important to what ensued in the last 70 years of Eritrean history. Eritreans have been deprived of political participation during the fifty years of Italian rule, as a result there was no organized political party or activity in Eritrea. The British began implementing some changes in Eritrea which included the establishment and implementation of a new educational system, freedom of speech, assembly and organising, and permitted political activity.

Taking advantage of the new liberal attitude of the British, political parties and labour unions were formed and newspapers flourished giving the Eritrean political life vibrancy. Debates regarding the future of Eritrea ensued by the Eritrean elites.

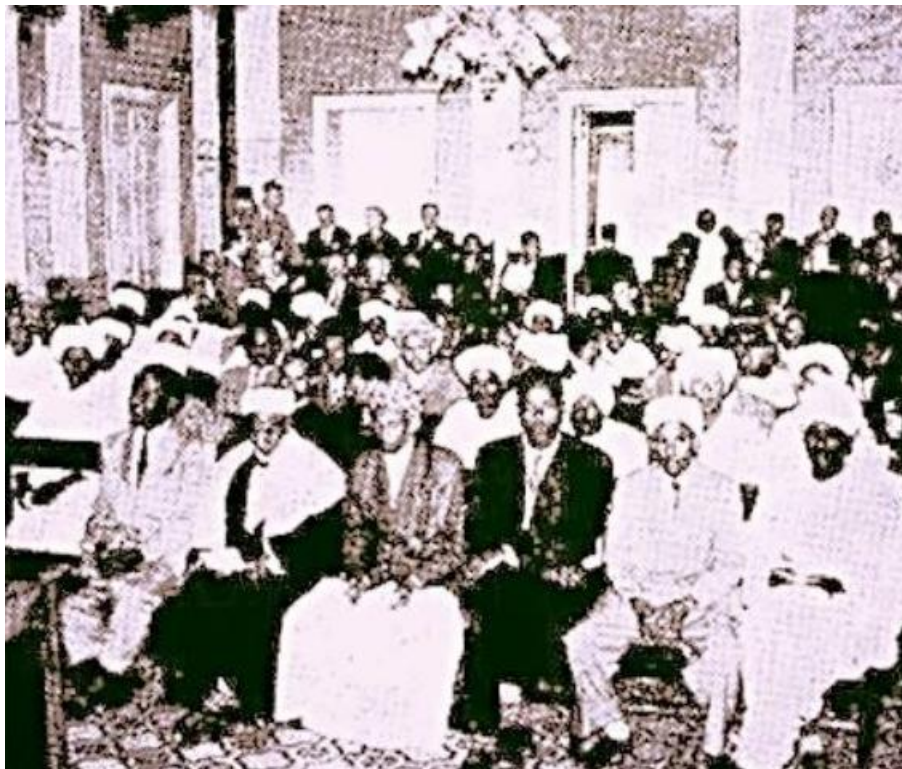
As a result several parties with differing programs were formed by various groups, the most important ones being: 1) The Unionist Parties (*Mahber Fikrehager*), 2) The Moslem League of Eritrea (*Al Rabita Al Islamiya*), 3) The Liberal progressive party (*Eritrea N'Ertrawian*), and 4) The Pro Italia party (*Partito Eritrea Pro Italia*).

The Unionist Party was formed as early as May 5, 1941 and coincided with the return of Emperor Haile Selassie to Ethiopia from exile. As T. Negash explains it:- While the Emperor raised the Ethiopian flag in Addis Ababa, the people of Asmara held a demonstration calling for the unification of Eritrea with its motherland Ethiopia. On the same day, the leaders of the conference announced the formation of the Unionist Party - an organization that was to play a very important role in the fate of Eritrea. Both the demonstration and the formation of the Unionist Party were of a very local nature.¹⁸

The Unionist Party was the dominant party in Eritrea, and derived its support from different Ethnic and religious groups. For the Unionist Party whose slogan was Ethiopia or Death (*Ethiopia woyim mott*), union with Ethiopia was simply the recognition of the fact that Eritreans are Ethiopians; no more and no less. The Unionist party believed that whatever problem the Union might entail, it is to be viewed and dealt with in the framework of a united Ethiopia along with other Ethiopians.

The Unionist party was well organized, purpose driven and believed that Eritreans would stand to gain by the complete and unconditional union of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Compared to the other parties, the Unionist Party enjoyed the largest support of the Eritrean people. Both Eritrean heads of State during the federal Era, namely Tedla Bairu and Asfaha Woldemichael, were elected from the Unionist Party which affirms its dominance in the Eritrean parliament.

During the Federation, the Unionist Party began to implement its agenda by methodically dismantling the federal structure. The assembly removed the national flag of Eritrea; changed the title of the Government to “Administration”; changed the seal of the government; and made Amharic the medium of education. The Unionists encountered only limited resistance when passing these legislations in the Eritrean Assembly. There was nothing stopping the unionist party from implementing its agenda.



Innaguration of the first Eritrean parliament On the 28th of april 1952 (sorry for bad quality photo)

The federal arrangement which was viewed by many observers as a compromise solution, was imposed on the Eritrean people by the UN, and was grudgingly accepted by the Unionist Party. Nevertheless, the Federation could not have worked between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and was still-born from day one, mainly because the concept of Federation was new and alien both to Ethiopians and Eritreans. It could serve only one purpose, i.e. a stepping stone towards complete union.



Unionist leaders of Eritrea. Left to right. Ato Tedla Bairu, Kekia Pahsa, Ras Kidanemariam, Dej. Beyene Beraki
(source: Ehrea.org.)

The Unionist party was responsible in dismantling the federation through legal means using the Eritrean Assembly. Proponents of Independence contend that the Federation was abolished by Ethiopia and not the Eritrean Assembly, and argue that Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. Given the political environment in Eritrea at that time, this argument is absolutely baseless and incorrect.

The Moslem league of Eritrea (the second largest party in Eritrea) which was formed in 1947 in Keren, was primarily formed to defend the rights of Eritrean Muslims and present a unified Muslim voice, and called for the independence of Eritrea. The formation of the Muslim league had the hand and encouragement of the British Administration in Eritrea.

According to T. Negash, Brigadier General Benoy encouraged the Muslims of Eritrea to make their voice heard. "General Benoy appeared to have made a strong impression and convinced Eritrean Moslems that unless they are prepared to think for themselves, the Plateau Christians will do the thinking for them".¹⁹

The founding fathers of the Moslem league of Eritrea opposed Union with Ethiopia based on the argument that Ethiopian Muslims were treated badly by the government of the Christian Emperor Haile Selassie, and hence it would be wrong for Eritrea to be united with Ethiopia. They were afraid that Eritrean Muslims would be worse off by unity. They argued that there is no Muslim Minister, parliamentarian or High ranking official in Ethiopia and that there is no organization that defends the rights of Muslims in Ethiopia.²⁰

It was the Muslim League of Eritrea which first adopted Arabic Language as its official language along with Tigrigna, at its foundation in 1947. Moreover when the federal constitution of Eritrea was being debated, even though the Unionist Party suggested that Tigré and Tigrigna be the official languages of Eritrea, the Muslim league objected and pushed for Arabic and Tigrigna to be the official language of Eritrea.²¹

It is surprising why a party which derives its support mainly from the "Tigré ethnic group" and is led by a prominent Tigré; Sheik Ibrahim Sultan, advocated for Arabic instead of Tigré. Over 80 % of the Eritrean people speak Tigrigna and Tigré (both Semitic languages descendants of Geez) as their native languages. Whereas only about 2.4% speak Arabic. Except the Rashaida, Arabic is spoken only by a few elites.

The Muslims of Eritrea do not know, neither speak Arabic. Arabic is used only for religious rituals by the Muslims the same way Geez is used by the Christians. No Tigré, Saho or Afar uses Arabic in markets, home, social or other gatherings. Neither do they conduct their day to day affairs at village level (bayto Adi) using Arabic. They do not communicate with their children, spouses, friends or relatives using Arabic. Even today, it has no value as a cultural symbol or as an instrument of communication. The selection of Arabic as an official language is not only absurd, but also raises questions on the motives of the leaders of the Moslem League.

(The following paragraphs are taken from Resoum Kidane's compilation dated 30/08/11)

In the 1950s the Eritrean people's struggle for independence was revived during the formation of the following youth and professional associations: Shabab which was the Moslem Youth League, Partite Giovanile Federalists Eritrea (The Young Federalists) and the Eritrean Youth Peace Council); professional Association (the Asmara Teachers' Association; Mah'ber Memheyash Hagarawi Limidi (Association for the Development of National Culture M.M.H.L) and trade union (The Workers Syndicate of Eritrea).

The above associations and the workers' syndicate of Eritrea played an important role in organizing the 4 days general strike in 1958 to protest against the violation of UN 390(AV) Resolution by the Ethiopia government. However, the 1958 peace demonstration was violently suppressed by the Ethiopian army that caused 88 deaths and 440 wounded. As a result of this atrocious crime the Eritrean people began to search for an alternative way to challenge the Ethiopian policy of coercion leading to the rebirth of the Eritrean people's struggle for independence in 1958 by the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM)/ [Harakat Atharir Al Eritrea]

By and large the suppression of the four days' general strike contributed to raising political awareness that led to the development of a strong Eritrean national consciousness and the foundation of the Eritrea Liberation Movement (Harakat) in 1958. Reid, (2011, 159) states that the ELM or Harakat espoused religious unity as well as armed struggle in the pursuit of independence from Ethiopia, and began to organize clandestine cells across Eritrea.

Iyob (1995:103) adds that the ELM's ideal of a secular Pan-Eritrean identity, activated through its politics of protest and reconciliation, set the foundation for a rich nationalist culture. All this had a profound effect on the defiant youth of the 1950s, the same generation that was later to construct the basis of modern Eritrean nationalism. However, the Moslem-Christian schism and ethnic rivalries resurfaced in the course of the armed struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The only genuine and progressive movement in the history of the Eritrean people struggle for independence was ELM's (Harakat). Alsayed (2009) states that for the first and perhaps last time in Eritrea's delicate history, the ELM managed to appeal to Eritrea's diverse society, united Eritrean Muslims and Christians, Highlanders and Lowlanders, infiltrated institutions including Eritrea's police force, spread its organisation and mobilisation cells of 7 (famously known and still remembered by our Kebessan counterparts as "mahbar shaw3atte" and in the lowlands/Muslims as "Haraka or

Haraket"). Alsayed adds that the ELM's (Harakat) path for liberation and independence was interrupted and later replaced by the ELF whose leaders were arrogant, intolerant of dissenting views and resorted to subduing opponents by force. This culture of intolerance and lack of democracy had continued until now.

End of life – by assassination

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 he 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**.

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.***

Ref: The ELEM vision

----- *The End* -----

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