

*Remembering unique Eritreans in contemporary history*

A short biographical sketch  
Of  
**Kjeik Ibrahim Sultan Ali**



**Ibrahim Sultan in 1965**

Source: google.com

*Compiled and edited from electronic sources*

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# Table of content

Early life	
Ibrahim Sultan: Working life	
British Administration of Eritrea followed by Federation with Ethiopia	
Political activities: <ul data-bbox="280 1043 695 1189" style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Formation of Al Rabita Al Islamia</li><li>• At the United Nations</li><li>• Waala Biet Ghiorgis</li></ul>	  
Historic contributions of Kjek Ibrahim Sultan Ali	
Exile and participation in armed struggle	
End of life – two years before independence	

## Early life

**Ibrahim Sultan Ali** (1909-1987) was one of the original proponents of the Eritrean Independence movement. Ibrahim was born in the city of Keren where he was educated in Islamic and Italian schools. He worked closely with Woldeab Woldemariam before the Federation with Ethiopia to secure Eritrean Independence. He was the founder of the Eritrean Moslem League.

### Birth and family:

Ibrahim Sultan Ali was born in Keren in March 1909 of a farmer/trader Tigre/serf from the Rugbat of Ghizghiza district in Sahel. He attended Quran School under Khalifa Jaafer of the Halanga of Kassala. In Keren, he attended technical training at Salvaggio Raggi and at Umberto School in Asmara. His only son Abdulwahab, lives in Paris.

## Ibrahim Sultan: Working life

Joining the Eritrean Rail Ibrahim Sultan worked as a chief conductor from 1922 to 1926. From 1926 to 1941, he was head of Islamic Affairs section under Italian rule. Served as civil servant in Keren, Agordat, Tessenei, Adi Ugri and even Wiqro near Mekele for six months. He had good command in speaking and translating Italian, Arabic and Tigrinia. From 1926 to 1941, he was head of Islamic Affairs section in the political affairs office under Italian rule. Under the British, he served as head of Civil/Native Affairs Office till April 1943. He resigned and established a modern cheese plant in Tessenei which he ran till end of 1945. The Eritrean Chamber of Commerce was established that year and he became one of its senior staff members till end of September 1946.

## British Administration of Eritrea followed by Federation with Ethiopia

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*).

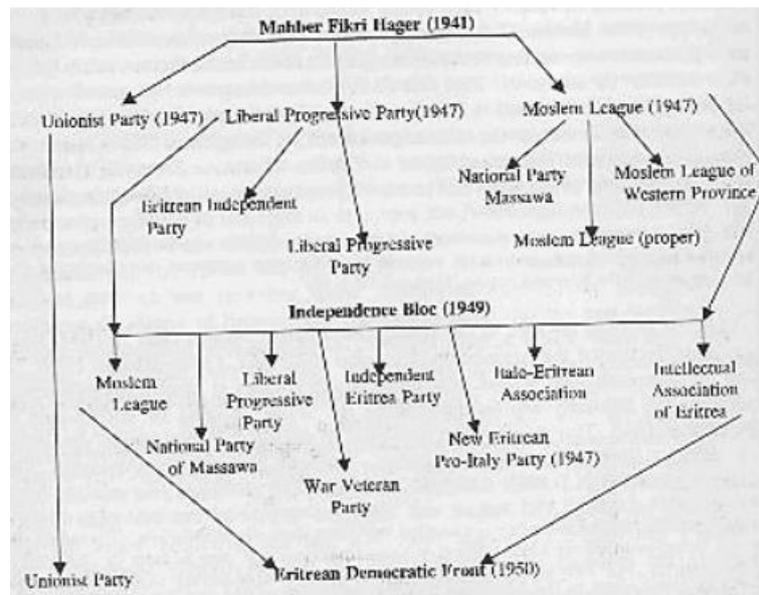
The Unionist Party was formed as early as May 5, 1941 and coincided with the return of Emperor Haile Selassie to Ethiopia from exile. As T. Negash explains it:- While the Emperor raised the Ethiopian flag in Addis Ababa, the people of Asmara held a demonstration calling for the unification of Eritrea 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.

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.



*Proliferation of Eritrean political parties*

Source: Redie Bereketeab, 2000, p.148

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".<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

It was the Muslim League of Eritrea which first adopted Arabic Language as it's 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.

### **Ibrahim Sultan's political activities:**

#### **a. Formation of Al Rabita Al Islamya**

At the United Nations, Ibrahim envisioned a violent battle for independence if the UN acted against Eritrean interests.

The Eritrean people's cause is a just cause of the independence of people who refuse and reject any form of annexation, dismemberment or a return to the hated colonialism no matter what type it would be, whatever form it takes, or from which direction it comes. This indisputable right to independence to which our country is attached can not be ignored without creating a new area of strife in East Africa, since the Eritrean people will never accept Ethiopian domination.

— Ibrahim Sultan, *"Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea"*. Fifth session Ad Hoc Political Committee. UN. 1950-11-21.



At UN, Sheikh Ibrahim is quoted to have said: “If a wrong decision is taken forcing us to struggle to safeguard our identity and obtain our independence, then the members of this Committee will shoulder the responsibility for the hostilities that arise in East Africa”.

#### b. At the United Nations

Ibrahim Sultan was the founding father of Al Rabita Al Islamiya though Abdulkader Kebire and Dejazmat Hassen Ali had participated in forming this organization. Although the organization was predominantly Islamic, its founding objective was not to spread and preach Islam but to liberate Eritrea. The organization made it clear that the people of Eritrea didn't want unity with Ethiopia and desired their independence.

Al Rabita Al Islamiya was established officially in December 1, 1946 in the town of Keren, during which every Moslem community in the country sent its representatives to the meeting where they elected their leaders. Seid Bekri Almurqani was elected as the president of the organization and Ibrahim Sultan the Secretary General. Religious leaders were also present in the election.

In May 1941, he was a founding member of the Patriotic Association till he helped found the Moslem League of Eritrea on 3.12.1946. The League took Keren as its headquarters till parties were shut down by Ethiopian interferences in the late 1950s.



The city of Keren

Ibrahim Sultan, who was a key figure in the establishment of Blocco Indipendenza (Independence Bloc) on 26 July 1949 was elected the Secretary General of the organization. In January 1951, he partook in the establishment of the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF) and became its Secretary General. He was a member of the first Eritrean parliament when he won election on 15/5/1952 representing the Rugbat tribe of which he was the traditional chief from 1948 to 1950.

As noted earlier, his activities in the emancipation of Tigre/serfs lasted between 1942 and 1946. The movement is usually known as the Emancipation Movement of Serfs (Harakat Tahrir al Aqnan). Ibrahim Sultan, who was the key figure in the establishment of Blocco Indipendenza in July 1949, had attended the 3rd UN General Assembly on 3.4.49 and the 5th Session of UN General Assembly in November 1950. In January 1951, he partook in the establishment of the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF) and became its Secretary General.



Ibrahim Sultan at the United Nations

Jaafer Assad, a relation of Ibrahim Sultan who ran errands for the man in Asmara in his childhood, is said to have told some years ago that Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan loved to watch films on daily basis in Asmara in the early 1950s and read the local daily Italian press.

We could thus see that the commencement and growth of the Eritrean political struggle for national independence is linked with big patriots like Ibrahim Sultan Ali. He and his friends formed the Patriotic Association in May 1941, long before any political awakening in Africa. That era in the twilight of liberation struggle was deficient in experience and lacked examples that could be emulated.

Woldeab Woldemariam said of Sheikh Ibrahim: 90% of the credit of preserving Eritrea in one piece goes to Ibrahim Sultan Ali. He added: "Ibrahim Sultan is a heroic patriot who deserves the praise, the gratitude of the entire Eritrean people".

#### British and Italian ploys against Eritrean Freedom (an assessment by Winta Weldeyesus)

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’atsnet 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’atsnet Ertra. The British administrators in Eritrea also accepted that 75% of the Eritrean people support Ketsri N’atsnet Ertra.

As a result of the campaign by Ketsri N’atsnet Ertra many members of Mahber Hibret joined the former by organizing themselves under a new movement called, Selfi N’atsnet 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'atsnet 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 Islamiya 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'atsnet Ertra

The primary objective of Ketsri N'atsnet 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.

## **C. Waala Biet Ghiorgis**

By Sami Mehari (24 November 2002)

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 *Waal* 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 *Waal*, 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 *Waal* 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 *Waalaa*. The independentist then knew that the whole thing has been reversed and that there was little to be done at this long-awaited *Waalaa*.

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 Tigray; 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 *Waalaa*. 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 *Waalaa*. 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 *Waalaa Biet Giorgis* and acquired fame in his zealous sabotage of the *Waalaa'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.

*Waalā 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.

<b>Historic Contributions of Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan Ali:</b>
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- He was the key actor in the emancipation of Tigre/serfs in Sahel and Barka who later filled the ranks of his mass movement for independence, the Moslem League of Eritrea (given that name, according to Sheikh Ibrahim, solely to counter the Ethiopian move to annex Eritrea using religion).
- He was the firebrand leader who helped found the Moslem League as the party advocating for self-determination.
- He had a significant role in establishing Blocco Indipendenza consisting six member parties.
- He was the first Eritrean political figure to widen diplomatic contacts, including a meeting with the Pope in Vatican.
- He was the voice of Eritrea at meetings in the United Nations.
- After federation, he was the Secretary General of the Eritrean Democratic Front (EDF).
- In the late 1950s, he became one of the exiled political

leaders who became the conscience of the new liberation movement building up inside the homeland.

- Till death claimed him in 1987, Sheikh Ibrahim sided with the liberation movement and always talked about unity of Eritreans without distinction of region and religion.

### **Exile and participation in armed struggle**

According to Jaafer Assad, Ibrahim Sultan left Eritrea in February 1958 together with Idris Mohammed Adem. Abdalla Idris Abdalla of Ad Hashel, member of the Sudanese army, took him from Agordat to Khartoum.

Also according to Jaafer Assad, a long-time ELF member said Ibrahim Sultan, Woldeab Woldemariam, Idris Mohammed Adem and Mohammed Saleh Mahmoud, member of Rwaq al-jabarti and former editor of Voice of Eritrea, were meeting constantly in Cairo. Ibrahim Sultan was later dropped out of the newly formed ELF by Idris Mohammed Adem because Sheikh Ibrahim liked transparency but the key ELF man of the day did not like this outspokenness. In later years, Sheikh Ibrahim attended the first ELF congress in 1971 and the second congress in 1975. He stood with the ELF tendency, and was against disunity and thus remained opposed to the PLF of Osman Saleh Sabbe.



Quotes of Ibrahim Sultan:-

"My children, make peace amongst yourselves. Be united; Don't be Moslems and Christians. Avoid religious, ethnic and regional differences and confront your foes by forging solid unity."

He was nominally a member of the Eritrean Liberation Front, he broke away in 1970 and formed the People's Liberation Forces, which was an immediate precursor to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front where he was reunited with his old ally from the pre-federation period, Woldeab Woldemariam.

## End of life: two years before independence

On the 1 of september 1987, Eritreans were as usual celebrating Revolution Day. But at the end of that day, they learned that Ibrahim Sultan Ali died in Cairo. It was a meaningful day and death. Ibrahim died in Cairo, after having been sick for many years. He was buried on 5 September in Kassala.

Ibrahim was a revolutionary in his own way and a great liberator not yet well known by many Eritreans who should know. His comrade-in-struggle Woldeab Woldemariam once attested that there would not have been an Eritrea as we knew it were it not to Ibrahim Sultan who had a big role in averting its partition and again was instrumental in creating a sort of status around which the trappings of patria and patriotism could be built by succeeding generations.

As already noted, Sheikh Ibrahim died on Revolution Day in 1987 in Cairo, at 4pm after having been sick for many years. Buried at 6 pm on 5 September in Kassala, 5000 people attended the funeral procession. He was buried at Khatmia near Mount Taka. Ibrahim Sultan was eulogized by Woldeab Woldemariam, with whom he has taken his place as one of the “father figures” of the Eritrean nation.



Last picture available of the nations gallant patriot Ibrahim Sultan Ali

### ***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](http://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