

Remembering unique Eritreans in contemporary history

*A short biographical sketch
of
Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omer
the First Mufti of Eritrea*



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Biography of Sheikh
Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omer
the First Mufti
of
Eritrea

Birth and early life:

Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar Ahmed Omar was born in Eritrea in 1909 in a village close to the coast of the Red Sea. He was the second child in a family of seven siblings. His mother passed away when he was only ten years old. His father was a respected scholar who received his Islamic education locally as well as in Yemen and Hejaz (Saudi Arabia). Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar received his preliminary education from his learned father.

From early childhood, Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar had a keen interest in learning and acquiring knowledge. In his teens he was eager to travel abroad to further his education. He had to postpone his travel plans, however, due to his father's

old age and poor health. He decided to stay back and care for his father until his father's death in 1924.

Travel in pursuit of knowledge:

Shortly after the death of his father, Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar, at the age of 15, left his village to go to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. There, he was enrolled as a student in the Umdurman institute. After spending two years at the institute, he left Sudan for Cairo, Egypt where he was accepted as a student at Al-Azhar Al-Shareef University.

Given his extreme desire to seek knowledge, he pursued his studies with great vigor and diligence. He did not limit himself to just the formal classes in Al-Azhar, but went beyond, privately educating himself by studying under many prominent scholars. He also conducted exhaustive personal research by exploring the resource rich libraries of Cairo, and, subsequently, reading and analyzing many valuable manuscripts and books.

In 1930 he became seriously ill and left Egypt to return to his home country, Eritrea. After spending about a year and a half at home, his health improved and he returned to Egypt to continue his studies. He successfully received the

degree of Alyimia from Al-Azhar in 1937. He then spent three more years in extensive study, specializing in the science of the Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (Usul Al-Fiqh).



Sahaba mosque in Massaua (source: Wikipedia.org)

Throughout his student life, he had the privilege of studying under the direction of more than ninety-three eminent scholars, many of whom belonged to diverse schools of thought and hailed from various parts of the world.

Life after graduation:

After receiving his Aliymia degree, Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar worked in different capacities. He worked as a teacher, a lawyer, and an editor with a publishing company. In Egypt he authored a number of books. He also reviewed, commented on, and published a number of classical books. One such book about the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, authored by

Sadr Alshariah, is currently used as a prescribed text at Al-Azhar. He also authored a number of anti-colonial articles in a newspaper known for its anti-colonial views.

Return to homeland:

In 1939 Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar was hospitalized because of his poor health. During his stay at the hospital he was restricted from undertaking work that involved writing or any other activity that could cause physical exertion. While in the hospital, he was informed by the Italian Embassy in Cairo about an offer to appoint him as the Mufti of Eritrea (based on requests made by local Muslim

leaders in Eritrea). The Sheikh initially refused to accept the offer, but, due to intense and relentless pressure, reluctantly accepted and left Egypt for Eritrea in April 1940.

The departure from Egypt was very painful emotionally for the Sheikh. He departed with a heavy heart and eyes brimming with tears. He had fond memories of the fifteen years spent there, in the prime of his life, in pursuit of his insatiable thirst for knowledge.

He arrived in the capital of Eritrea, Asmara, and took charge of his responsibilities as a Mufti and Qadi Al-Quddat (Grand Judge).

Later on, he was also assigned various additional responsibilities, such as the Chair of the Islamic Eritrean Waqaf (endowment) Council, the Chair of the Council of Eritrean scholars (Jabhat Al-Ulama), and others.



A mosque in down town Asmara

Political environment surrounding the Mufti:

During his career that spanned over thirty years, he dealt with four governments: The Italian rule (1940-1941), the British mandate (1941-1952), the Eritrean Government (1952-1962), and the Ethiopian Government - Emperor Haile Selase- (1962-1969).

Political turmoil, sectarian violence, assassinations, and constant upheavals characterized this period in Eritrean history. He played a pivotal role in shaping

various national events because of his deep knowledge and understanding of the political, constitutional, and legal issues of the day.

During the British mandate and the political struggle to determine the future of Eritrea, he didn't join any of the many competing political parties. However, his inclination was towards the independence block, in particular the Al-Rabita, since his elder brother (Hajj Sulieman) was one of its main co-founders. In all his communications with United Nations envoys, politicians, and officials, he firmly demanded that the aspirations and rights of the people of Eritrea be fully respected and considered. He argued strongly in favor of recognizing Arabic and Tigriniya as the official languages of the country.

After the passing of the Federal resolution by the United Nations and the establishment of a federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, he consistently demanded the full implementation of all the provisions in the resolution and respect for the constitution. He vehemently resisted any attempts to undermine either the United Nations' resolution or the constitution.

After the illegal annexation of Eritrea by the Ethiopian regime and the emergence of the Eritrean armed struggle, the Mufti came under increased pressure to succumb to the will of the Emperor and his government. The Mufti protested against the sectarian and discriminatory practices of the government and objected to all interference in the religious affairs of Muslims. He protested against the indiscriminate killing and destruction of villages and towns by government forces in various regions of the country. He resisted government pressure to issue fatwas condemning the Eritrean rebels (who were mostly active in Muslim dominant areas) as criminals and as outcasts from Islam (kaffir). Instead, he called for negotiations to resolve the conflict and fairly address the grievances and the root causes of the conflict.



symbolizing the Mufti's unwavering belief in cooperation between religions and religious leaders

(Illustration and caption are additions by the editor)

Final days:

The Mufti spent about thirty years as a key figure in Eritrea where he served as a spiritual leader, an educator, an author, a jurist, and a conciliator. After a long and distinguished career, the Mufti passed away at the age of 59 on June 25, 1969 in a hospital after a short illness. His death sent shockwaves throughout the country. Thousands came from all across the country to pay their homage to the departed soul. There was a huge public outpouring of grief, which, among other things, was articulated through a series of poems and articles written in his honour. He was indeed one of the greatest personalities of his time. He was placed to rest in peace at the "Haz Haz" burial ground in Asmara. His wife Aisha; two sons, Ismael and Salem; and three daughters, Fatima, Suad, and Zahra survived him.

Contributions:

The Mufti's contributions are widespread and lasting. He reformed the Sharia courts and established a formal and modern court system with formal rules and proper procedures. He established a selection criterion for the appointment of qualified and competent judges (Qadis). He organized national conferences for judges (Qadis) to discuss issues and to pass resolutions.

He organized and expanded the waqf (endowment) system with large sections of real estate all over the country and established a solid and well-managed system of governance and record keeping to be managed by a representative body.



Grande mosque - Keren Eritrea.

He initiated and encouraged the establishment of schools. During his time, wealthy businessmen under his direction established many schools. He established the largest Islamic library in the country, donating more than 3,000

books from his own personal collection. During his time as a mufti, more than thirty mosques were built throughout the country.

He managed to create greater awareness and abolish many prevailing evil social practices, harmful traditions, and innovations (bidah) in matters of religion. Through articles in local Arabic newspapers, lectures, and sermons he managed to spread a proper and accurate understanding of Islam. He established the Council of Scholars in order to educate and disseminate knowledge and the proper practice of Islam.

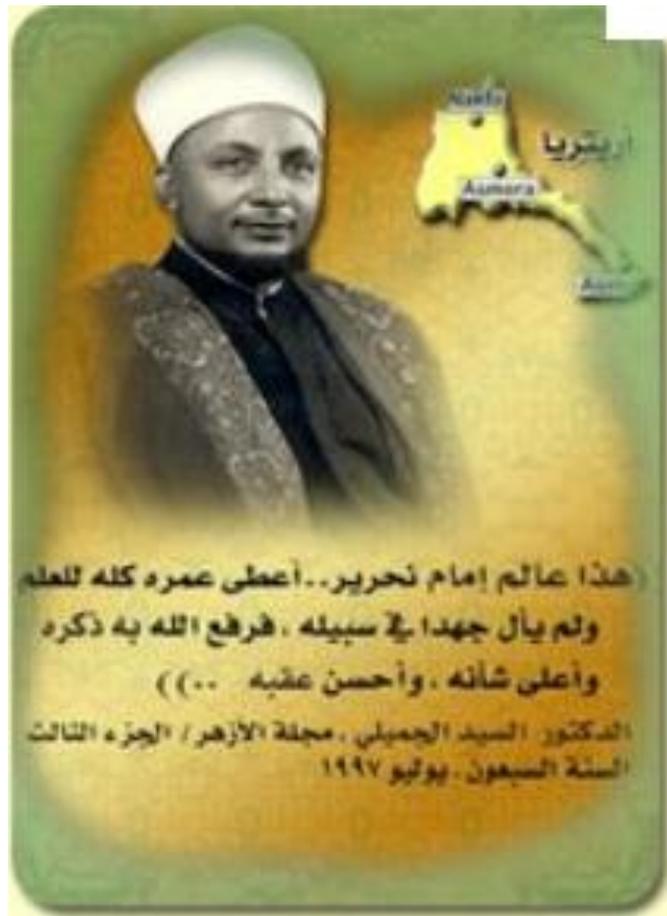
He managed to bridge the gaps between various rival groups and bring them together under one umbrella in the service of Allah.

Books:

The Mufti was the embodiment of knowledge. He authored close to fifty major and minor books in different subjects including Islamic sciences, history, genealogy, and the national affairs of Eritrea, which were all authored in the Arabic language.

Personality:

The Mufti had an imposing personality; he was very friendly, approachable and forgiving. He had no lust for power or wealth. He chose to live modestly, rejecting all offers of wealth, and stood faithful to his values and principles. He was courageous and firm in upholding the principles of justice and teachings of Islam. He was an eloquent orator. He was widely accepted and highly respected. His popularity was great and widespread.



Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omer, the first Mufti in Eritrea

In addition to his immense knowledge of Islamic sciences, he was also an eminent historian and an expert in the field of genealogy (*Ilm Al-Nasab*); in particular, the genealogy of Eritrean tribes. He was very organized and hard working. He slept only for a few hours and dedicated most of his time to writing, reading, devotion, and tending to the affairs of Muslims.

The non-Muslim national leaders respected him for his firm stands on national issues. He called for peaceful coexistence, tolerance, cooperation, fair dealing, and equal treatment of all citizens. He, along with the Eritrean Patriarch, played an important role in ending the sectarian violence that spread in some parts of the country. He traveled through the neighborhoods of Asmara and different regions of Eritrea calling for calm and an end to violence.

May Allah bless his soul and shower him with His mercy.



----- *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.

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