

Ibrahim Sultan Ali:
A Liberator Who
Passed Away on
Revolution Day 20
Years Ago Today



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Eritreans are today solemnly marking the 46th anniversary of the commencement of their armed liberation struggle that they conducted for 30 years starting on 1 September 1961. That day, affectionately called Bahti Meskerem/Fatih min Sebtember, has been a revered national holiday to Eritrean patriots of all walks of life for decades. In addition, freedom fighters, especially those of the ELF, aptly called it Revolution Day.

Twenty years ago (on 1 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 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. This writer fully endorses this conclusion because we would not have Revolution Days to celebrate or even a cause worth a fight if it were not to the UN Resolution 390 A (V) of 1950, or the democratic Eritrean Constitution of 1952 or the Blue Flag or the Eritrean Parliament that patriots of those days bequeathed to us. Ibrahim Sultan was the Greatest Patriot of them all. That is my personal conclusion.

I saw only a silhouette of Ibrahim Sultan once. It was sometime in the year 1956: me a child in grade three, and he a big leader of the biggest party of the day. The man was so popular, and my friends from his neighbourhood shouted: Look! Look! Ibrahim Sultan! I looked but saw only the back of a man in white jelabiya (garment) entering his office somewhere near the only Mosque (then) of central Keren. That was all. But in later years, I read and asked more about him, and today wish to share with readers some of my pocket notes of this patriot I secretly admired in spite of what I heard critiques said of him.

Historic Contributions of Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan Ali:

- *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.*

Below are some more detailed pieces of info about the man from my casual notes:

Who, then, was Ibrahim Sultan and what did he do?

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.

Working life:

Ibrahim Sultan worked as chief in train station (1922-26), served as civil servant in Keren, Agordat, Tessenei, Adi Ugri and even Wigro 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.

Political life:

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.

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.

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.

Jaafer Assad, a relation of Ibrahim Sultan who ran errands for the man in Asmara in his childhood, told this writer a few 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".

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".

Exile and participation in 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. In Sejana, Kharoum, Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Mohammed Adum were kept in the house of a Yemeni married to Eritrean, Abdurebu Selami. Egyptian embassy provided visa in 12 days. Train tickets to Cairo paid by Jamiyet Tahrir Abnae Eritrea (Association for the Liberation of Eritrean in Khartoum).

Also according to Jaafer Assad, a long-time ELF member whom I befriended in Iraq in the 1990s 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.

This writer was informed that Sheikh Ibrahim told Isayas Afeworki in 1976 that the latter was wrong to secede from the ELF in 1970 and again from the PLF in 1977 because “this was not good to the unity of the people”.



This same message was repeated to the EPLF congress in 1987 that Sheikh Ibrahim sent them. 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.

What Homeland is Isayas Afeworki's Eritrea that could not even think of receiving with respect the remains of Great Patriots like Ibrahim Sultan Ali and Idris Mohammed Adem, and Osman Saleh Sabbe, all buried in Eritrea's neighbourhood before and after independence?

At this 46th anniversary of Revolution Day, we all should salute our heroes, scattered here and there – dead and alive.