

REMEMBERING THE 1975 AND 1976 HARGIGO MASSACRES: HOW IRONIC THAT WE SAY NOTHING ABOUT THE RETURN OF THE ETHIOPIAN PERPETRATORS TO ERITREA?

(Part I)

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April 6, 2021 marked the 46th anniversary of the 1975 tragic massacre of Hargigo, in which about 300 residents were brutally slaughtered by the Ethiopian army, and their houses burned to ashes. For those who are not quite familiar with the geography and political history of our coastal region, Hargigo is a town about eight kilometers north of the Port city of Massawa. When we talk about the port city of Massawa, Hargigo is the immediate mainland that we take into consideration. It was for this reason that, in the sixteenth century, Ethiopian emperors had claims over this town, and when the Turks occupied the port of Massawa in 1557, they had to cross to the mainland and immediately occupy Hargigo, where they established a garrison. In other words, any colonial power that wanted to occupy the port of Massawa, and eventually expand to the whole Eritrea, had to occupy Hargigo first. Otherwise, the control over the port, and expanding to Eritrea as a whole, will not be complete and safe. The reason is that the port city will always be vulnerable to attacks from Hargigo. This will lead us to the question: ***In what way did this geographical significance shape the characteristics of the people of Hargigo?***

As the people of Hargigo were the first constituent of the Eritrean population any colonial power came in direct contact with, before it crossed to the Eritrean highlands and other parts of Eritrea, they were the first to taste the ugliness and brutality of colonialism. That is the reason why it is not surprising that the spirit of resistance, responsiveness, and defiance to authority, has always been some of the characteristics of the people of Hargigo. The oral traditions and popular songs depict their resistance during the Turkish, Egyptian, British, and Italian colonial rules that witnessed the burning of the town and the persecution (sometimes elevated to massacres) of its people, at least once during each of those colonial periods.

One of the 16th century heroic incidents in the oral traditions of Hargigo, passing from one generation to another and still alive, has to do with the team headed by Adem-Be (a member of the Balaw tribe, to whom the Naib family, the traditional rulers of Samar, belongs). Oral traditions have it that Adem-Be and his team swam from Hargigo to the Turkish Palace built in Twalot, slaughtered the representative of the Sultan of Tukey (governor of Massawa and Swakin in the Sudan at that time), dismembered his head, and swam back to Hargigo, safe and happy with the head of the governor, as a symbol of their heroism. Though oral traditions and songs are valid, as primary sources in historiography, in the absence of written sources, even

recorded history shows that the Turks never had stable rule in Massawa because of the permanent danger coming from Hargigo, from time to time. They always saw the people of this town as trouble makers. Interestingly enough, all other colonial powers treated the people from this mentality and mindset. This is to say that bearing the brunt of the Ethiopian colonial hatred, persecution, and brutality, was not a coincidence, but a consistent part of the long history of the town since the 16th century.

The brutal massacre of April 6, 1975 was followed by another equally brutal massacre on December 31, 1976, in which about the same number (300) of lives were lost (including my father: whose full name is Ali Mohammed Habib, to give those, who carelessly-prepared the list of victims, the chance to correct their list, and make it more authentic and accurate). In both tragic events, the Ethiopian army entered the town with the sole purpose of slaughtering the people, and reducing the town to ashes.

Though the memory of those atrocities is not mentally healthy to keep coming to the forefront every year, a constant reminder is always needed. Accordingly, the Jeddah-based Hargigo Committee for the remembrance of the twin massacres held a commemorative meeting for the community on Zoom on April 10, 2021 to help keep the memory alive and show support. We thank the committee for inviting us to commemorate the tragic events by enabling us to listen to the survivors' family members, friends, and other eyewitnesses, who remembered the massacres like they were yesterday. It was an amazing meeting in which many reflected on the lessons that rang then and continue to echo 46 years later. I am not shy about sharing what I have heard and the impressions I got from the eyewitnesses, not hesitating to express my views on the issue, and treat the massacres of Hargigo, as a part and parcel of the whole picture that existed in 1970s Eritrea.

Most of the victims were great examples of what good men and women are. Many of them were fathers, who were hardworking bread earners for their families. I cannot help to imagine how these precious lives were cut short, for nothing but hatred. Though, as believers we trust that they are in a better place now, these were people who had so much to offer. Some of them were young men and women who wanted to go to the farthest limits of life, with so much ambition and hope, and very smart in thinking about their career prospects. Though my heart goes out to everyone impacted by the tragic events, including the victims, the eyewitnesses, their relatives, and friends, in addition to the whole population of the town, who have never stopped mourning, I would say few words about my father and three of my former teachers, who had special place in my life.

My father was one of the best fathers I have ever known. As a fisherman, he toiled day and night, with very primitive fishing tools to earn bread for the family, and make it possible for me to continue my education. Though ours was one of the poorest families in the town, he had never bothered me to quit my education and help him in supporting the family, though even families having by far better livelihood were hasty to see their sons join the workforce because of the job opportunities Massawa had to offer, as a sea port. This will be explained below to

illustrate my point, and on my way to show why many promising students had to cut short their education, due to the temptation the job opportunities in the port city constituted.

Unlike the PFDJ era, characterized by economic and multi-dimensional decadence (I do not mean only perceived decline, but total decay as well), Massawa was an important interface in the supply chain between sea and land transportation. As a component of freight distribution, it was the port of entry for produce, merchandise, and passengers to the country. It was also an exit door to all exports of northern Ethiopia to the international markets. All these made Massawa blessed with a good number of companies related to the port activities, as detailed above. The presence of these companies had become the centre of attraction and an incentive, a negative one of course, in the sense of diverting the youth from their educational pursuits, and limiting their goals to the completion of grade eight, looking forward to the day of joining the workforce in one of these companies. As a matter of fact, nobody could imagine I would finish the high school, let alone to join the university, given the poverty of the family. That was the result of the unique patience of my father, and his trust on me, that I knew better what the best for the family was.

I graduated from Addis Ababa University and joined the teaching force in August 1973, so delighted to see the day my parents had patiently waited for has come, and with a high morale to live to their expectations. Unfortunately, it was after supporting the family for less than three years only that my father was slaughtered in the second massacre, or that of December 31, 1976. That left me with a permanent argument with myself, and sometimes with a feeling of guilt, that it was too selfish of me to go so long in a journey to complete my education, while my father toiled that much, to rest only for less than three years, before the untimely end of his life. That has become a permanent element of my psyche.

One of my three former teachers killed in one of these massacres, was Shieck Mohammed Adum of Hagad, a village in the vicinity of the town of Keren. As a teacher in Hargigo School, Shieck Mohammed Adum, was always the ray of sunshine and hope in the town, on any cloudy day. No one could possibly have a bad day, when Shieck Mohammed was around. He was a teacher of high calibre, a smart preacher, an Islamic scholar with very high moral standard, a reliable social worker outside the school, a sincere guidance officer for the public, as well as an ardent patriot. In few words, he was a rare combination of all of these traits.

Other former teachers were Ustaz Ahmed Mentai (the word "Ustaz" means Memhir) and Ustaz Saleh Karani, both known for their decency, dedication to their work and to the good of the society, whose values they cherished, and a rare fatherly outlook and compassion towards their students. Ustaz Saleh Karani was massacred together with his wife, leaving behind three children: two five-year old girls (twins), and a seven-year old boy. All were handed over to EPLF and raised in Sahel, as orphans, later to become fighters to revenge the death of their parents, when they grew up.

The town was a frequent target of the Ethiopian army, throughout the early and mid-70s. The residents were always rounded up, gathered, and forced to sit under the merciless heat for up to eight hours without food and water, surrounded by the soldiers, while army men inspected their homes. Any bus leaving for Hargigo from the port city, was stopped half-way, strictly inspected, and all commuters thoroughly searched one by one, after they had been forced off the bus to line up. The army men were so scary, and spoke as if they were Nazi officers, while inspecting the bus and searching the commuters, whom they threatened, mistreated, and humiliated. Roughing up some of the commuters was not uncommon occurrence.

The Ethiopian army in Massawa, and the regional administration, always believed that the people of Hargigo supported the ELF and later the EPLF fighters, who were stationed in Gadem, located in the vicinity of the town. They thought that the residents provided the fighters with food supplies, money, medicine, other essential materials for life, and intelligence against the army, in addition to treating the wounded in their homes, and doing some errands for the fighters. As everybody knew what was in the mind of the local leadership of the Ethiopian army in the region and the regional administration, they expected that one day some tragic massacres would take place. Due to this fear, some families moved to Edaga, the port city, and Amatare paying rent, though they had houses in Hargigo.

Both massacres seem to have been planned and systematic. In both tragic events, the army entered the town in darkness at night, and started shooting at the people indiscriminately. They went from house to house, slaughtering everybody they saw. Women, who were shielding their children were shot, and when the children tried to run, they too were slaughtered. Houses were set on fire, and anyone inside who tried to escape was gunned down. During the second massacre, Navy ships coming half-way from their base, bombarded the town, adding to the destruction and loss of life. Many scared residents were fired at, while trying to escape away. The bodies scattered, with flown limbs here and there. All ran for their lives, taking different directions towards Gadem, a mountainous area, where the fighters were stationed, while army guns and Navy artillery followed them. Amid the confusion and chaos, family members could not pay attention to one another. Consequently, nobody could tell, if family members were alive or dead, until the next day, and in some cases a couple of days.

After shooting stopped in the morning and the army left the town, villagers from the surrounding, and relatives from Edaga and the port city came, collected the bodies, and buried them. The young survivors were so filled with rage, due to the loss of parents, brothers, sisters, other family members, friends and acquaintances, that they immediately joined the armed struggle. That was what the EPLF wanted, according to some public opinion. In fact, residents argue that the EPLF fighters, who were in the vicinity, could have foiled both massacres, had they wanted to. They add that they were so close to see the army trucks heading towards Hargigo, could hear the shooting going on the whole night, and easily see the town burning. This is a very strong argument any reasonable person could buy.

In fact, as fighters, they should have their own methods and devices to detect the situation and the intention of the enemy. Though we do not expect them to have electronic sensors and warning systems, we expect that they had some basic devices, like military telescopes and binoculars to perceive the attack, the nearness of the enemy, the location, size, activities, and weapon capability.

Moreover, the second massacre is believed to have been triggered by the EPLF attack on AGIP. AGIP is a harbour building required to gather, store, and transport oil. It is located half-way between the port city of Massawa and Hargigo. As public opinion is a tyranny by itself, it is difficult to challenge what people believe. It is difficult to verify this story when the PFDJ gang is in power, but Eritrean historians, especially folks from the locality, will one day find out the truth when the environment for research and investigation becomes conducive.

In addition to the survivors who joined the armed struggle, the brutality of the Ethiopian army sent shockwaves across the region, putting into question the citizen's sense of safety. As a result, youth from all towns connected or close to the port city, specially Edaga, Hutumlo, Amatare, and Emberame, flood to join the armed struggle, and their parents escaped to the surrounding mountains for safety. This rage and sympathy were natural reactions in a society tightly linked by blood and marriage. Here we loudly ask: ***Was the flooding of the youth to join the armed struggle what the EPLF wanted?*** Leaving that question for the historians to answer, we move to the question: ***What happened to the people of Hargigo and the surrounding after the second massacre?***

Nobody came back to live in the town and the other towns connected to the port city after the second massacre. The old, women, children, and the unfit for fighting were directed to the liberated areas at the borders with the Sudan. Some later settled in Port Sudan and Kassala, whereas the majority, who managed to get brothers, uncles, or cousins to sponsor them, ended up in Saudi Arabia, which they thought was safe and easier for them to re-locate. Their decision was based on the geographical and cultural proximity, in addition to the similarities between Jeddah and Massawa, in terms of physical environment and climatic conditions. That is why we have a very big Massawa community in Jeddah since 1976.

It is very unfortunate that they could not benefit from the independence of the country, and make a safe return home because the ruling gang always put serious obstacles, thwarting their return. The obstacles here, have been exactly the same as the refugees in the Sudan have been facing, though generations after generations are in forced exile since early 1960s. In short, their conditions and fate is exactly the same as the 1948 Palestinian refugees, whose hearts and minds are at home and their bodies in exile. One has no choice but ask: ***Could national independence be real when citizens, who fled from the brutal massacres committed by the Ethiopian army, are denied the right of returning home from exile?***

Another question which imposes itself is: ***Were these twin massacres of Hargigo isolated incidents or a continuation of an existing pattern?*** To begin with, it could generally be said that the twin massacres could come second in rank to Ona massacre of December 1, 1970 (a village about two kilo meters from Keren), in terms of the number of victims, whereas they could be considered among the worst massacres in terms of the magnitude of brutality committed by the Ethiopian colonial army on unarmed people across the country. However, as these twin massacres were not isolated incidents, we need to see the bigger picture that was prevalent across the whole Eritrea at that particular time. To that end, we use the following questions as our tools:

- ***What was the national environment or the political climate in Eritrea when the twin massacres of Hargigo took place?***
- ***Were other Eritreans in other parts of the country safer?***
- ***Where do these twin massacres belong chronologically within the pattern of the massacres committed by the Ethiopian army nationwide?***

The first recoded massacre in Eritrean history committed by the Ethiopian army goes back to July 24, 1967 in which about 172 civilians were slaughtered. That massacre took place in Hazamo, “where several villages were wiped out and the throats of men were slit in front of their wives and children.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_massacres_committed_during_the_Eritrean_War_of_Independence). This massacre is among the 20 listed in this particular source. Second to this massacre, in terms of date, comes the massacre of Agordat of late 1967, in which about 50 students suspected of being ELF members were hanged in down-town Agordat, later parents were forced to take their kids from the hanging posts.

Agordat was the site of three massacres: late 1967, September 3, 1975, and April 1988, all claiming the lives of over 300 citizens. Even Asmara and its surrounding villages were not immune from massacres. On December 28, 1974 about 45 students of Asmara were strangled to death with piano strings, later dumping their bodies in the streets. On February 14, 1975 over 500 civilians gathered in churches, families in their homes, and students attending schools, were gunned down in the villages surrounding the city of Asmara. These massacres of February 14, 1975 were, exactly like the second massacre of Hargigo, committed in retaliation to the EPLF attacks on two Ethiopian divisions. ***Was the intention of the EPLF similar to that of the second massacre of Hargigo?*** I am confident that Asmarino historians will find out one day.

We conclude that all massacres committed by the Ethiopian army were spread across the country, leaving no region, ethnic group, or religious community untouched by the hatred of

the Ethiopian army. This way, they united the whole country in the same fate, leading to the emergence of clear-cut Eritrean identity, and forcing the angry youth to join the armed struggle.

Part II of this article will try to answer the following questions:

- *Why is remembering the twin tragic events of Hargigo significant?*
- *To what extent did we find the accounts of the eyewitnesses helpful?*
- *What were the short-term and the long-term impacts of the massacres of Hargigo on the survivors?*
- *Should massacres necessarily be committed by the occupation army in order to be condemned and their victims commemorated?*
- *How do we honour the lives lost in these massacres and others elsewhere in the country?*
- *Is silence on the return of the Ethiopian army to Eritrea compatible with patriotism after they had committed so much atrocities?*