

Obituary
**In Memory of Abu Rijela, the Disciple of
Hamid Idris Awate and Friend of Abu Shanab**

By
Woldeyesus Ammar
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I felt sadness and sharp internal torment when I was informed the other day that the leader of the well celebrated Battle of Togoruba, Mohammed Ali Idris (Abu Rijela), passed away in Kassala, Sudan, on 13 February 2010. The sadness did not emanate from a wish for him live beyond 83 years, but from the regret about my generation's failure to let him pass last days and happy and at home. I also found it disturbing to see little done to make Abu Rijela's and his friends' deeds of sacrifice and heroism known to the generations that came after them – to those who today make nearly 90% of living Eritreans.

Nowadays, it is very hard to find alive even a handful of the veterans of the first decade of Eritrea's armed liberation struggle. Literally all of them spent their last days in squalor and abandonment in and around Kassala. Abu Shanab (Osman Mohammed Idris) was there in bad shape till he passed away 10 years ago. Abu Rijela was not in a better situation. It is an all-round sadness and shame to the new Eritrea that they dreamt of to bring freedom, peace and prosperity to its people.

Abu Rijela was the one who led the Battle of Togoruba in March 1964 in which the Ethiopian regular army engaged units of the Eritrean Liberation Front for the first time after the police force failed to confront the liberation fighters. In that battle over 80 Ethiopian soldiers were reported killed. This victory against the enemy was a harbinger of what would finally happen to the occupation arm. Another battle, that of Afabet in 1988 put the final seal to the defeat of the enemy. And interesting enough, both the battles of Togoruba and Afabet took place within the month of March. And who knows Eritreans may one day agree to celebrate every year in March the historic victories at Togoruba and Afabet in memory of the veterans of both of Eritrea's mainstream liberation movements: the old Jebha and the old Shabia.

Omar Jaber (now in Australia) and I happened to interview the veterans of the 1960s at Rasai, near Kassala, exactly 28 years ago. Every one of our interviewees had something interesting to tell. Abu Rijela, had this to say:

"... I was born near Agordat and joined the Sudanese army in April 1944 at the age of 17. I did not know the difference between Eritrea and the Sudan till 1956 when the Sudan became an independent republic. I became member of the ELM in 1959. The movement refused our demand to ask Awate to start an armed organization. At that time, Abu Shanab, Mohammed Ali Tinay, and myself discussed about divorcing our wives and go to fight the Ethiopians. We joined Awate's unit of 20 fighters in [the spring of] 1962 and for the first time brought them uniforms...By 1962, we were about 60 fighters moving in two platoons. No less than 80 former soldiers in the Sudanese army joined the ELA in those early years. We resembled forest guards by night and contraband traders by day.

By end of 1964 and early 1965, [we reached] 800 fighters... We veteran fighters always feel bad of not having won the liberation war. We live with it every minute. I hope the new generation will work in full unity to fulfill our people's dreams for freedom, peace and prosperity".

May his soul rest in peace.

Memory and eternal glory our martyrs!

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NB: For the benefit of those who know little about the battle that Abu Rijela led 46 years ago, I take the liberty of reprinting below parts of a short article I wrote (under a pen name) in memory of Abu Shanab, who died in 2000, and his comrades-in-arms like Abu Rijela. – Good reading.

IN MEMORY OF THE BATTLE OF TOGORUBA

March 31, 2001

.....To generations of Eritrean fighters, the mention of Togoruba evoked many memories, among them the name of Abu Shanab. Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Shanab) was one of the key leaders of the battle of Togoruba. In addition to his narrations about battles like Togoruba, he was known for his frank talk and sharp comments, sometimes wrongly referred as "jokes". The quotable quotes from Abu Shanab usually turned to be useful and lasting maxims. The last adage I heard people ascribing to him is the following:

A few years after independence, Abu Shanab was shown the new Eritrean government seal, the passport and early drafts of banknotes for the Eritrean currency, Nacfa. It is said that he looked at the papers with a mixture of delight and astonishment, and after managing a chuckle, was soon overwhelmed by anger. And after clearing his throat to make sure that all around him hear what he was going to say, Abu Shanab quipped the following words in his 'Arabic', which always contained a good dose of Tigre: "Jela Jelalu Rabi, Al-jamal juwa, waba'Elu bara" (Oh God! The camel is in, and its owner out).

1. Perceptions and Realities in Eritrea

Abu Shanab's candid quips were always uttered in public. Few Eritreans dare do that, except, of course, some ballad singers like Echet Hina (Idris Mohammed Abdalla), who disappeared long ago in the mountains of Sahel, and Wad Ji'ef (Hamid Ji'ef) who was gunned down by 'unknown gunmen' recently in his house inside Wad-Sharifey at the Eritrea/Sudan border after reciting at large gatherings his last tirade of criticisms directed against the politics and wars of PFDJ/Isayas.

What was Abu Shanab expressing via the above-quoted witticism? An Eritrean reality or a groundless perception? Those Eritreans who stopped playing ostrich know the correct answer.

By that statement Abu Shanab was for sure summarizing in a few words all what can be said regarding the politics of exclusion, the absence of reconciliation and unity, the lack of rule of law, and the misappropriation of power in today's Eritrea. He was criticizing why independent Eritrea should keep its citizens in refugee camps outside home. He was expressing bitterness as to why those Eritreans who fought for that independence for generations should be kept at bay. He was saying why large segments of the Eritrean population were reduced to second class citizenship – made powerless, voiceless and guideless due to the absence of their village leaders, including their own sons and daughters, deliberately kept in the banishment of exile so that the “one nation” plan could be engineered out of polyglot Eritrea. In fact, Abu Shanab is also said to have jibed at one point that one of the mistakes of "Assayas" was to have taught about nine nationalities during the years of struggle but only to reduce them to two (“wedini Asmara wa MassawaE”) after liberation.

The veterans of the battle of Togoruba are now all aged and gradually passing away, all expressing feelings of discomfort and unease with the political, social and economic situation in the country.

2. The Battle of Togoruba

According to the ELF Arabic publication of Al-Thawra , year 3, issue No. 10 of June 1964, the battle was fought on 29 February (and not 15 March!) 1964 at Togoruba in the Hawashait district. Under its main news item entitled: “Decisive Victory for Eritrean Revolutionaries at Togoruba”, ELF’s Arabic Al-Thawra magazine of June 1964 reported that an enemy force of 200 “Tor serawit” deployed from Haicota that morning was crushed in the battle: 84 Ethiopian soldiers killed and many wounded. The Ethiopians brought more reinforcements and the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA) withdrew with its four wounded but failed to collect the bodies of its nine martyrs. On their way back to Haicota, the Ethiopian soldiers killed 8 peasants and took all 17 Eritrean bodies (of ‘bandits’) for public exhibition as follows:

- 2 bodies were exhibited in Haicota
- 3 bodies in Barentu
- 6 bodies in Agordat, and
- 6 bodies in Keren.

The decomposing bodies were reportedly kept hanging in market places of the said towns for too long that elders had to go to government offices and beg that they allow them bury the dead bodies.

Compared to huge figures on enemy losses in battles of the late 1970s and 80s, the victory at Togoruba may appear modest. However, contrasted to its own period and the stage of the Revolution, that battle was a landmark that promised final Eritrean victory through the barrel of the gun. Until Togoruba, the enemy was using “Police Abay” to fight the Revolution. It was at Togoruba that the ‘Tor Serawit’ confronted the ELA for the first time ever.

Those who recall can recall that the ELA was everything in Eritrea during the first 20 years in the life of our armed struggle. It was an army that had debilitated the energies of two Ethiopian regimes, heavily armed and supported by super-powers. It was an army that highly valued, preached, practiced and deepened the elements of unity, mutual respect, social justice and harmony among the people. It was an army that closely served and taught the people, while also learning from them, in transforming the society without denigrating social values and accepted traditions. It was an army that played its weighty and proper role in the struggle. How sad that the once budding culture of tolerance, healthy dialogue, participatory democracy and care for unity of the people in their diversity was curbed at one stage of the struggle, to never be replicated by those that assumed the vanguard lead in the struggle. How sad that the young generation could not yet see the military, political and social strengths of the ELA and its uncontestable contributions to the victory that Eritrea celebrated without the ELA in 1991.....