



From Eritrea's File

Issayas Testamarism
(A library specialist at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a student of Eritrean Cultural Studies)

Did you know?

◆ Commander Edward Ellsberg was commissioned by the United States Navy in 1941 to create a naval base in Massawa and to salvage the greatest mass of wrecks in the world (including Pearl Harbor). In his book, *Under The Red Sea Sun*, he wrote,

"In the three harbors of Massawa and its islands lay a fleet of some 40 vessels, German and Italian. Freighters, passenger ships, warships, crowded every berth. In addition, in the north harbor were two irreplaceable floating steel dry-docks.

"A tornado of explosions swept the Massawa waterfront as bombs, strategically placed far below their water lines, blew out the sides, and bottoms in the naval shops were smashed with sledge hammers. Electric cranes were tipped into the sea. Everything in the way of destruction that Italian ingenuity could suggest to make Massawa forever useless to its approaching conqueror was painstakingly carried through.

"When the last bomb had gone up and the last ship had gone down, the Italian admiral rubbed his hands in satisfaction over such a mass of scuttled ships as the world had never seen before. Then he surrendered Massawa."

49 years later, Mengistu's air force also tried in vain to make Massawa useless forever.

◆ There is a small collection of birds from Eritrea in the US National Museum and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California. During the early stages of World War II, when North Africa was an important battlefield, American troops were stationed in Eritrea. Two of them were destined to spend some time in Eritrea and collected birds. According to Herbert Friedmann of the US National Museum, Col. L.R. Wolfe sent a box containing eight birds to the museum. A

second shipment of about 300 specimens was unfortunately lost in transit.

Thame Riney similarly lost the bulk of his collection, but was able to bring back 37 birds, which he sent to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California.

Some of the contents of the Walfe and Riney collections were described by Herbert Friedmann in the *Journal of the Washington Academy of Science* in 1948. It is indicated there that the birds were collected in the months of Jan/Feb, 1943 from Ghinda, Barentu and 20 km from Dekemhare.

◆ During the period of Italian colonialism in Eritrea, an apartheid system was imposed. Marriage between a European and an Eritrean was prohibited. There was a case in which the Italian Governor of Eritrea, Ferdinando Martini, declared a union between *Keshi* Marcos Ghirmai of Quazien and Regina Johansson, a Swedish citizen, as 'detrimental to the prestige of the European race.'

Keshi Marcos was an Eritrean evangelist who graduated with distinction in 1889 from Johanneund Theological Institute in Stockholm. He came back to Eritrea after being ordained by the Archbishop of Uppsala. While in Eritrea, he fell in love with a Swedish missionary teacher, Regina Johansson, and they married in December 1899. Governor Martini demanded 'rectification' by forcing the bride to leave Eritrea in order to maintain the *status quo*.

The Swedish Evangelical Church, which was against the marriage, promised Governor Martini that no Eritrean would be sent to Sweden for schooling from then on. In return Governor Martini allowed the couple to stay together inside Eritrea in a restricted atmosphere. Despite the compromise, *Keshi* Marcos and Regina decided to leave for Sweden in 1922.

(Dr. Arain Tsaggai, *Journal of Eritrean Studies* Vol. IV 1982).

Table Talk

Nyala Hotel Asmara 123111

Cheap it isn't, nor particularly cheerful, but the Nyala Hotel is going through an interesting time. The exotic seventh floor tent restaurant has moved so 'national food' is served in the more mundane surroundings of the first floor. The menu is rather limited which is a pity as the Nyala is the place where the business and diplomatic community feel they can take guests to sample Eritrean cuisine in comfort. It would be nice to broaden the range of food available - perhaps offering more local (highland and lowland) foods with a short explanation of cultural differences. It wouldn't be fair right now to focus too much on the disconcertingly Bucharestian ambience of the hotel in general. Hopefully a new, private sector broom will sweep away sombre austerity and allow guests to relax into their meal - enjoyment being an essential ingredient in Eritrean cooking. Hopefully, too, trainees taking part in a catering and management course based at the Nyala can practise the art of restocking the toilets when they run out of paper.

Port Club, Assab 660521

The lights of Eritrea's Windy City are a joy to behold after a gruelling journey down the coast. And travel-stained gourmets can look forward to a feast at the Port Club. Manager Hailom Fissahaye is the right kind of person to kick-start the private sector after years in the doldrums. The staff are attentive without being invasive and aside from the Nescafe (nothing can beat fresh Eritrean coffee), the meal was faultless. Crab, lobster, fish salad and gorgeous fish soup make you wonder why you never came here before. Lobster and crab should be ordered in advance, but they are cooked minutes before you eat them and served with home-made egg mayonnaise and chips that would make a cockney drool. Assab is a rather straggly place, but with luck the town planners will see that the new metropolis of the south will move in the direction of the Port Club. Conceptually as well as by road.