

This interview may be of help to understand our past. Many Eritreans have migrated near and afar for generations. I have talked to different elders on their family past, as well as my own forefathers' history.

Our migrating tradition makes us try new lives than be subjected or wiped out. Clans were close knitted and news went quickly making others become aware of possibilities.

Family story told to me by Adei Letenkiel Neguru Asmera 1994, her home. I enjoyed sitting with her. In the 70s, I did not chat with her but now had the opportunity.



She is a very intelligent and smart woman with good memory and history knowledge. I was surprised later to read in books what she had already told me, about Emperor Tewdros of Ethiopia and other notables of Eritrea. I do not think she read these history books, but she knew a lot. She has a good sense of humour, a la Keren. So here is her audio recorded narration of her family.

My father's name is Neguru, son of 1, Tesfit, 2, Yostos 3, Tesfa-Ageba 4, Deblom 5, Fekur 6, Rom-Seged. (Rom-Seged and his brother Bilen-Seged are the brothers forefathers to a vast area in Serae. Another source)

My father was born in the Zemen Aka-hida (era of betrayal, meaning famine. In the 1860-80s several famines are registered in Eritrea.) He is from Hatsina village, his mother coming from Mai-Leham village of Meraguz county (both in Serae)

In bad times there were many battles between clans. And the age of Shorokh (cholera) came. My father was a lad and his brother died of this cholera. It was the time that Emperor Yohannes died (1889) and the Italians landed in Massawa.

There were too many wars then anyone strong seizing others' properties and no rule was there. (Many were starved and many more forced to migrate to far away territories, as the Turks ruled in Keren area and held rules that many converted to Islam for protection. Though not official, the Italians were showing their power even in the mid 1880s, that many flocked to them. The Protestant priests in Massawa and Mensa lands, and Catholic priests in Keren were good inviting areas for the starved.)

My father's neighbour, a fitwareri (perhaps not military, but meaning of combatable age) told him that the Italians are in Massawa and they should go there. So my father took his sick younger brother with him as their parents had died then. (The Italians had food, and was known all over Abyssinia. Emperor Yohannes died. Italians landed in Massawa in 1885, and put their flag instead of the Turkish one, Feb 1885)

My father's friend told him to wake his brother. My father tried to wake him, but when he did not respond, his neighbour found out he was dead and they had to bury his brother inside their fence and went their way to Massawa.

That time in Massawa, the Italians had forbidden natives from entering Massawa because of the diseases they brought with them. My father and his friend were thrown out of Massawa and though young, my father roamed into the Bahri of Akele-Guzai. (on the way to Massawa,

as the Akele Guzai and Hamassiens went to "Bahri" every six months to use the other rainy season of the "Bahri" that they were able to harvest twice a year. It is on the road to Massawa, but fertile lands.)

He then started selling fresh water to Massawa on small delmis (goat skin?). (This was usually done by the young natives of the area, as salt free water was found inside the mainland. Though tough, it was a good way of work for the young, in very hot and unprotected conditions, usually in skin bags carried on mule backs.)

Then, my father was told that his sisters' husbands had become soldiers of the Italians and were stationed in Keren. So he went to Keren after them. There, he started a contract of washing Italian soldiers' cloths, employing washers.

Then, after saving some money, he went to his father's village to commemorate them - Teskar. (It is still very important to every child to commemorate his/her parents. Else the souls linger in limbo)

His paternal uncle's daughter had already done this traditional necessity. So he was obliged to her and paid her for the teskar. (A teskar is a celebration with priests blessing the day and all invited to eat and drink, to officially show the passage of respect of the dead, perhaps to heaven). My father then returned to Keren.

The Italians then forbade the usage of Abyssinian money from Eritrea. So my father opened an exchange shop. Then he opened a shop of other commodities and became settled. So he married my mother in her young age.

My mother grew up in Keren but was born in her village of Adikolom in Hamasien. My grandmother was from Zigib village of Hamasien, family of Degiat Hadgu. She was married to the village of Adikolom. But her husband died after she had one son and one daughter.

The bad famine came. Life without a supporting husband was very hard. But her brother had become a priest and moved to Keren. So when it became hard to survive, she took her children all the way to Keren. (those days there were no transport means, but walk, amidst bandits, animals, food and water shortage, and slept under trees be it rain or shine. But usually inhabitants of any village let a moving family stay inside. If only men, they sleep inside barns. It was usual to holler "who will let me sleep inside" and those who can call them, and feed them as well.)

While walking once, a man was following her. She became aware of him and with one child on her back and the other walking, she hurried away, but still the man quickly found her. She was very worried, usually it is to steal her food as starvation was wide. She at last found a man walking, so afraid, she came near the man and told him of her fear, lucky for her, the man helped her and the stalker seeing this disappeared.

My grandmother made it to her brother in Keren. (That means she converted to Catholicism) Her young son started learning to be a priest but became sick and died. So my mother was young when she married my father. (She told me that lions used to roam inside Keren Lalai, even inside St Mikel's church stealing goats or mules, that she said a lion is a Christian going to the church at nights).

My parents had many children. As we were mostly girls, some were married to Serae and Akeleguzai etc. My father had always wanted to return to his native Serae, that he did not build a strong home in Keren. But when he went there and saw that the people swore falsely on earth, the earth which all humans will be buried on, he swore never to return there and built his home a Mereb'aa (service like strong home).

Adei Letenkiel married to a Mensa' man Aboi Debessai from Adi Bula sub clan of Bet Abrehe clan. (The Mensa are two brothers' clans, Bet Abrehe and Bet Shahken(Isak) then both having their own sub clans. )

In the late 1880s, many migrants came to Keren for food and protection, as far away as Amhara and Tigray and other parts of Eritrea. Especially in Massawa, the Swedish protestant priests have recorded so many Oromo and Amhara and Tigray names, most young boys who converted and served inside Eritrea. But in the 188-92 great famine, 3/5th of all people died of starvation and cholera, that a great influx of movements were seen. Even Ethiopia lost many people.

The Catholic priest in Keren who was fondly remembered by the old people was Abune Bikar, Padre Peter Picard. He brought cereals from Massawa and gave it to the needy. As a white man, many from the rural area thought he was a white devil but were forced to come near him. One woman said "Please give my children food father, but you may eat me only" (eat means to make one sick) As many women also were naked, he gave many women cloths to put on. He was mostly their moral father as he showed great love to them. Many were converted without understanding or caring, but many men for protecting their families. The Abune was thrown out of Eritrea by the Italians, he being a Lazarist, not Capuccini. (End of part of this story)