

Reflections on the Rock

By

Ezra Gebremedhin

Introduction

Late in the evening on February 29, 2012, I opened my computer to check the entries on some of the websites that I visit. One of these is Dehai.org. There I discovered an article entitled: “If I Should Consider myself as a True Eritrean”, by Dawit D. Ghebremedhin. The article deals with Naqfa and its significance for the person who had written the article and for other Eritreans. I remembered right away that I too had written an article on Naqfa, some seven years earlier. That article too was published on Dehai.org.

Naqfa belongs to the past. Shouldn't we then let it rest in the past? Especially since possibilities of bringing about change in any sphere of life are to be found in the present and the future, and not in the past? Isn't there a risk that turning back to history can imply flight from present day realities and challenges?

These questions are justified. There is, however, one reason which has encouraged me to go ahead with the republication of an article from as far back as 2005. When my Reflections on The Rock were first published, many Eritreans whom I respect, Eritreans with sober, critical minds, gave me their words of encouragement. This makes me hope that the article may still have some relevance for Eritrea and Eritreans in the year 2012.

No individual or community can live solely out of its past. No individual or community can sit on its laurels, its achievements of yesterday. However, the fact remains that our yesterdays too have significance for our todays. These yesterdays are the forums of Fathers and Mothers of bygone days, the classrooms of Teachers and Disciples who have now receded into silence. These yesterdays are indeed records of both success and failure! But they can, nevertheless, whisper wisdom and courage into our hearts today.

A body must be nourished both from the outside and the inside. Among the potential sources of nourishment and recovery for individuals, communities and nations is the backward look, the occasional glance at the past. After all, there is a time (a season) for everything, as the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, 3:1-8 (in the Bible) maintains. One of the items on the “menu” listed by ‘Ecclesiastes’, is *‘time to listen’*. A listening in depth! A digging into our inner gold-mines, as it were! From time to time we need to assume the innocence of children who are willing to take a pause, sit and listen to stories. March 24 and Naqfa offer us such an opportunity.

It is true that even stories which time has clothed with reverence must be subjected to rigorous checking. This applies to our views on all events and places of importance, not only to Naqfa. We human beings have a common tendency to romanticize and exaggerate the significance of persons, places and events which are a part of our specific past. We have to watch against this self-centered and divisive tendency. This, however, should not stop us from consciously calling to mind some of the memorable events in both our local and national history. Not to do so would be to squander a precious resource.

It is true that some things should be “forgotten”. For the sake of health and sanity! Among these are bitterness, hatred and sorrow. One can very well understand why people subjected to pain and anguish can develop such emotions. Creatures of flesh and blood are bound to react. However, it is also an inescapable fact that persisting bitterness, hatred and sorrow are poison, plain and simple. That, incidentally, is what priests and pastors, sheikhs and imams, teachers and elders try to point out to people who cling to their grief and pain! This is a challenge which requires “grief-work, a sum total of mental (spiritual) efforts which are as important as physical work! Facing ones ‘demons’ squarely and coming to terms with one’s wounds from the past, is the only way to move forward as a truly liberated person.

However, there are also things which should be remembered and recalled. Amnesia (forgetfulness), in its general, and not medical, sense, can also be a serious defect. It can, in fact, be a symptom of disorientation in the lives of individuals and communities. Unfortunately, such forgetfulness can also lead to creeping contempt of oneself. A kind of constant spitting on one’s own history and background! Such behaviour can become contagious. But it should not be mistaken for virtue. Sound self-knowledge and self-criticism is in place. And we all need more of it than we think! But no individual or community can afford the impoverishment that such creeping ‘self-contempt’ implies. We are indeed called upon to face facts. Even painful facts! But we cannot pass on what I would call self-contempt to coming generations.

I have modified some words and a sentence or two in the reflections that I wrote in 2005. When I first wrote this article I expressed, albeit briefly, the wish that Eritrea would develop into something of a family, a body. Am I an idle dreamer? Or is there a place for dreams even in our days? Do give this article, and Naqfa, a chance.

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A Place to Remember

Places are quiet storytellers. And in that role, they outlive generations. Such places are sources of inspiration and dearly acquired lessons. Names like Hastings (1066), Waterloo (1815), Adwa (1896), El Alamein (1942), and Dunkirk (1944) awaken both pride and pain, among victor and vanquished. On March 22, 1977, the town of Naqfa, in northern Eritrea, fell into the hands of *tegadelti* (literally ‘strugglers’ or ‘contenders’). It is twenty-eight years [N.B. When this article came out first!] since this event, with such far-reaching consequences for the emergence of Eritrea as a nation, took place. Two and a half decades are long enough for a child to be born, grow up, be educated, acquire a profession, and establish a family and start producing children. But they are also long enough for people to begin forgetting events with deep symbolic value.

Those who regard war from a safe, poetic distance are tempted to glorify it and sing its praises. I have no intention of joining such a company. However, I do believe that something can be salvaged from the ruins of war. After all, roses grow in the midst of thorns. And war does, sometimes, bring out some of the best qualities in human beings. There are many instances of concern, courage and selflessness displayed in the midst of the horrors of battle. And there is one virtue associated with Naqfa, the quality of *TSin'At* (Tenacity).

To Keren and Onwards

Permit me to share my impressions of Naqfa with you, from a trip undertaken to “The Town on The Rock” just over a year ago. The date was February 24, 2004. My hosts from The Eritrean War Disabled Fighters Association (EWDFA) and I started from Asmara roughly around 5:30 in the morning in our Toyota Land Cruiser. The car was something of a bulldog, perfectly fitted for the terrain we were going to travel across. We passed *Imba derho*, *SerejeQa*, *DeqemHare* in quick succession. In the dim light of dawn we could see some early risers, hurrying on their sandal-clad feet, cane in hand. Some raised their hands prayerfully, entreating the driver to stop and give them a mercy ride. At 6.30 we passed *Addi Tekelezan*, the home of my wife's parents and ancestors. I could see her uncle's humble "snack bar" to the right of “the main highway in town”, still shrouded in receding darkness.

On we drove, along a road with endless curves, ascents and descents. News and music from the radio and fold after fold of rugged hill country kept us company. We climbed or descended on a road twisting perilously, snake-like, leaning towards the protective feet of many a slope and trying to keep away from the edges of yawning precipices. For me, a passenger from the tamed highways of Sweden, the hill-hugging, cliff-skirting road to Keren was a nightmare. Our driver, a former *tegadalai*, was however in perfect control of his vehicle. On to *Ilaber'Ed*, and *Keren* whose distant hills were enveloped in morning mist!

In Keren we ate *sheHan fool* for breakfast at *Geza'i Hailé Biét Qursi* (Geza' i Hailés Breakfast Cafe). This was the first time I had eaten this morning meal (with a Sudanese ring about it!), a combination of a spiced, sauce-like vegetable dish and breakfast food. I enjoyed it thoroughly. After our pause in Keren, with some of its ambitious buildings (which included an imposing Catholic cathedral), we drove on through more sparsely populated regions. We advanced through simple checkpoints marked by pieces of cloth flapping in the wind, sleepy villages with humble huts and small towns that boasted a shop and an eating place. There was an arid beauty about the countryside through which we drove, with its mountain ranges and bush-dotted valleys. We drove past *'Ad Shrom* and its carcass of “enemy” tanks. We crossed dry riverbeds, waving to many a camel or goat owner, often with an axe balanced on a shoulder. Bareheaded or turbaned, these children of the Eritrean wilderness seemed neither hurried nor worried.

The Climb

At 10.30 a.m. our Toyota Land Cruiser started climbing the road up to the Rock. The vehicle must have started using its entire horsepower, as it roared and whined on, slowly, respectfully

but stubbornly. Symbolically, the vehicle, clad in metal and moving on sturdy tires, was evidently doing what *tegadelti* had done over two decades ago, slowly, laboriously, in khaki shorts and on feet covered by simple rubber-bottomed sandals. All around us valleys kept opening and disappearing in rugged curtains, as we left them both behind and below us. We stopped by a ridge and looked down on former trenches, once occupied by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, alternately. I have read accounts of how cold it can be at night on these heights. But we were travelling in a comfortable car, in good sunny weather.

The terrain awakened in me some of the pictures painted in the words of the late Ethiopian journalist and author, Be'alu Girma in his Amharic novel, *Oromai*:

Sahel is cursed ground, filled with mountains, linked like chains and speeding out of sight, from horizon to horizon; like skyscrapers piercing the space heavenwards, these sharp, stony elevations; like the open mouths of hell and the yawning jaws of Sheol. [...] The mountains provide neither paths for the feet nor crags for one's toes to dig into. Not even monkeys (leave alone human beings) can find this terrain hospitable! [...]

[...] Some mountains are shrouded in fog, up to their shoulders, resembling proud highwaymen, standing wrapped in their gowns, contemptuous of the world. This is the natural fortress that the enemy has chosen from which to give battle.¹

We climbed on, negotiating one curve after another. This was movement to higher ground, physically and emotionally. Those who once scaled these heights must have done so at the cost of blood, sweat and many an uncertain moment. And surely, for those who had to climb down, the descent must have felt dark and depressing. Our ascent up the Rock was far less dramatic, far less demanding. Our guide continued his narrative about the quiet secrets that these rocky slopes kept. There is a saying in *tigrinja*: “*Kitizarebo qellil `iyu*” (To narrate about these events is easy!), the implication being that *words* can never do justice to *events*.

At last we saw the sign, *InQwa'I Addi TSin'At atoKum!* (Welcome to the Land of Tenacity!), a name of honour given to Naqfa. We were now approaching the outskirts of the town on The Rock. A training centre was the first building complex that met our eyes. Finally, we drove into mystical town, unchallenged.

The Town on the Rock

We were welcomed by some local representatives of the EWDFa at their offices, in a building with a commanding view over Naqfa town. We then went out to look at the historic place. Our eyes took in the skyline with the help of a pair of binoculars. A mosque or two were in

1 B. Girma, *Oromai*. August 1991, p.291. Addis Ababa.

evidence, as was the local Orthodox Church, located on elevated ground at one edge of town. We visited some government offices (manned but meagerly that day because of a religious festival), we saw the signs of a cemetery in the midst of town, paused at Naqfa's town square, and looked into some shops, cafés and simple eating-places. And of course took pictures.

The local Orthodox Church was celebrating the yearly festival (*nigdet*) of *Kidane Mihret* (The Covenant of Mercy) a commemoration of The Virgin Mary. A former fighter received us in his home. After some time, his pious wife returned from church, clothed in white, with her baby strapped on her back. She and her helpers gave us a delicious “vegetarian” meal, appropriate to the season of Lent. I noticed that her husband had only one (healthy) eye and only one (natural) leg. He had paid for the soil on which he stood with the currency of these limbs.

Following a leisurely meal we drove in the direction of the trenches of *Denden*. The sight of bullet, grenade and mortar shells still dotting the rocky ground told the story of grim struggles. There were evidently battles in which flying metal filled the air. I saw the tattered remains of a military uniform. I even picked up a small, rusty medallion with some fading *Ge'ez* letters!

A Thumb Rendered Limp!

We moved on to some stony, jagged lookouts, perched on elevated terrain. These rocky posts reminded me of tall, lean, reckless individuals, balancing precariously on the edge of an ominous precipice. The highest of these lookouts had the intriguing name of *Globe*. I had climbed, at times literally crawled, up the rock. Our guide, a former fighter, had reached the *globe* well ahead of us. I soon learned that he, who had hopped from rock to rock with the nimbleness of a goat, had only one leg of flesh and blood. His other leg was of wood, a so-called *bamboulla*!²

The word *Wardia* (literally *Guard*) was neatly painted on a metal plate at the highest point of this part of The Rock. For a moment I was caught between the excitement of having arrived and the apprehension of losing my foothold. To my embarrassment, I succeeded in dislocating the *Wardia* sign as I nervously reached out with one hand for some support! My right hand shot to the ground in an attempt to keep my feet steady.

² He was an *akale sinkul* (a war disabled person), a member of that remarkable breed of Eritreans with whom I was to spend some weeks, bouncing or cruising on roads of varying qualities and peering into trenches or looking into simple restaurants, coffee shops, bakeries and enormous baking ovens!

It was then that it happened. I struck my thumb against a hard object. The pain was so intense that for a while I thought that I had broken my thumb. But no, I had only knocked it against a piece of rock. I did manage to straighten up, encouraged by the loud reassurances of my more sure-footed companions. But I was already dizzy from both the height and the pain. And I noticed that my thumb had become an aching, limp appendage. My right hand was hardly able to keep the other fingers together in a respectable grip! Was this little incident a trifling reminder of what those who were *not* tourists once experienced on this Rock? A reminder that one cannot pretend to play the part of those who experienced *real* pain and *real* heroism!

Or did my aching thumb have an even deeper significance? Was it an analogy for the absolute necessity of co-operation between a *healthy* thumb (‘*Abbay* ‘*Abbeyto*) and *healthy* fingers (‘*ATsabi* ‘*E*), if a *hand* (*id*) is to function well? Was the Rock in fact saying something to me about the challenges facing present day Eritrea?

Honour to whom Honour is due!

His name was Erwin Rommel (1891-1944). The German general, a Field Marshal, had the respect of his German compatriots already before he took command of the *German Africa Corps* in North Africa during Second World War. But Rommel also won the respect of his foes among the Allied Forces. And that is the point I want to make in the following section of my reflection. Though the Allied Forces under General Bernard Montgomery (1887-1976) finally defeated Rommel’s troops decisively at The Second Battle of El Alamein (Egypt) in 1942, both friends and foes continued to refer to Rommel admiringly as *The Desert Fox*. He was a model of military brilliance and tenacity (*TSin’At*).

Above all, Rommel was a gentleman in war. It is interesting to note that though he was a general in the German Defense Forces (the *Wehrmacht*), he was not a member of The Nazi Party. When Lucie-Maria Rommel and Fritz Bayerlein, gathered and published Rommel’s personal papers and notes in 1950, they chose the striking title *Krieg ohne Hass* (War Without Hatred) for their publication. A British officer, (whose name I don’t remember now) captured by Rommel during the North Africa Campaign and kept in prison for some time under him, later wrote a highly appreciative biography of his former captor!

***TSin’At* (Tenacity) Among One’s “Foes”**

Honour to whom honour is due! Permit me to mention an unsung soldier who fell just outside Naqfa in 1977. I first read about Mammo in a book written by an Eritrean surgeon, Dr. Tekeste Fekadu, author of the fascinating account *Journey From Naqfa To Naqfa. Back To Square One 1976-1979*.³ When a young combatant handed Dr Fekadu a letter from the Eritrean Commander of the front line at *Emba’luqo* on March 18, 1977, only four days before the fall of Naqfa, Dr Fekadu said to himself, “The days of Mamo are numbered”.⁴ And I wondered who this Mammo was, named only by his first name. I later found out that his title

3 Printed in 2002 by Sabur Printing Services, Asmara.

and full name was Major Mammo Temtimé and that he was commander of the 15th battalion of Ethiopia's army in Eritrea.

Already on the next page, Dr. Tekeste describes Mammo as “the staunch and tough commander inside Naqfa”. The surgeon then adds,

Mamo commanded the different units in the camps within Naqfa. He was tough, decisive, and cool, and had never been intimidated by the many surprise attacks we had launched during the past months. Most admitted that he was a real soldier. Although there was no hope for the Derg to hold Naqfa, Mamo was determined to fight to the last bullet. I witnessed two surprise night attacks (hujum) by our combatants from the compound post. I was very impressed by the way he was encouraging his soldiers.⁵

Describing the events after the fall of Naqfa, Dr. Tekeste continues,

Many (Eritrean) combatants were interested in learning what became of Mamo. He was found dead. He allegedly shot himself just outside of Naqfa in the place where the few Ethiopian soldiers fled towards Afabet. It was a desperate attempt to escape at the last hour. Alas, he did not get credit for bravery and was labeled a traitor after Naqfa and Afabet fell into our hands. Even we combatants felt sorry for him being labeled traitor.⁶

Honour to Dr. Tekeste Fekadu and his like for magnanimity in the midst of war! For, indeed, honour should be given to whom honour is due! I know that cruelty and blind injustice, in war or in peacetime, can create deep bitterness. I have full understanding for such a reaction, although I cannot condone it. However, *sustained* and *cultivated* hatred is poison, both for

4 Op.cit. p.89.

5 Op.cit. p. 91, footnote.

6 Op.cit. p. 97. See footnote.

those who nurse it and those who are targets of it. And a soldier who only hates and is intent on solely pouring contempt on his or her foes cannot be a good combatant!

Honour to whom honour is due! That is a message from Naqfa. Such a generous attitude may very well contribute, in the long run, to the cause of mutual understanding and respect among people in conflict. Men and women of genuine courage and a true sense of justice somehow “find” each other, even across the chasm of bitter conflict. Be'alu Girma, author of *Oromai*, was a firsthand witness of The Derg's highly trumpeted Red Star Campaign in Eritrea in 1982. He writes the following words about an Eritrean fighter by the name of *Si'ilay BeraKhi*, one of the characters in his novel: “*Metchem Telatim bihon, Jegna yikeberal!*” (Even an enemy deserves honour, if he is a hero!) ⁷

Be'alu's novel describes incidents which exemplify the maxim that honour should be given to whom honour is due, regardless of the camp to which one belongs. It is to be remembered that Be'alu later disappeared under mysterious circumstances. From what I understand, his car was found abandoned on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. One can only speculate about his fate, but my guess is that he was liquidated, not only because he had challenged *persons* in the Ethiopian military, but also because he had implicitly questioned a *prejudice*, the *prejudice that one's foes should be painted black, at all costs!*

Honour to Ethiopians like Be'alu Girma and Eritreans like Dr. Tekeste Fekadu who give credit where credit is due! This too is a lesson from The Rock.

The “We” of Solidarity

Her name was Berhana.⁸ She could just as well have been a *Miniya* or a *Zeineb*, or a *Rayet*. I am not writing about Berhana because I have evidence that she was more heroic than other male and female Eritreans who fought by her side or hundreds of kilometers away. I am writing about her because of a question that she put to Dr. Tekeste Fekadu, and because of the circumstances under which she asked the question.

She was assisting the surgeon at an operation at the field medical unit at Tenas, in late March 1977. Dr. Tekeste had returned from *Emba'luqo* clinic in the vicinity of Naqfa without carrying out the emergency operation which he had been summoned to perform. Later on, he understood that he had been called to treat a head wound to “Berhe Za'Eda” [Berhe Tsa'ida],

⁷ p.65

⁸ At a house of mourning here in Uppsala, in February 2005, an Eritrean woman told me that Berhana was still alive and that she was now a medical doctor in Eritrea!

the Commander of Battalion 3, a senior cadre who had died two hours after he was hit at Naqfa.

For some days, the wounded had been coming in to *Tenas*, in a steady stream, on donkeys, on the backs of comrades, on stretchers carried by fellow fighters. They were being brought in and sorted out according to the type and intensity of their wounds. Berhana had waited anxiously during Dr. Tekeste's absence. When he came she could no longer hold back her question.

While they were attending to a patient on the primitive operation table, she asked Dr. Tekeste,

*By the way, where are we now? I mean how far had our comrades reached when you left Emba'luqo?*⁹

I cannot pride myself with knowledge of the details of the Eritrean struggle. I am sure that, as is the case with all armed struggles, there are both noble and not so noble aspects to this struggle. Human beings and human achievements should not be idolized. I must however honestly admit that when I first read Berhana's question to Dr. Tekeste, I found it electrifying.

For me, Berhana's question reflected solidarity at its deepest and most authentic level. For weeks, she and her companions had slept little, eaten frugally, rested only intermittently and worried about the gigantic challenges that faced a field medical unit not far from a blazing war front. Uncertainty was their lot during a good part of the siege of Naqfa. And yet Berhana's primary concern was not personal. There was no sign of self-pity in her question. The words, "By the way, where are *we* now?" was a veiled cry. Here was the quiver of the expectations of a whole people, expressed in one voice.

In Closing

Tegadelti took possession of the top of the Rock on March 22, 1977. Their arrival implied the end of trails of sweat and blood. Having visited Naqfa, crawled into some of the trenches around it and heard some first hand accounts of its story, I too am inclined to say, "Honour to whom honour is due!"

But to have ascended the Rock is, or should be, to realize that one has also been *carried* by The Rock. The *Valleys* around Naqfa were there before *Valour* echoed in their rugged corridors. The *Cliffs* were there, waiting, before the *Climbers* arrived. The *Terrain* was there before the *Trenches* were dug into its sides. In its immensity, variety and durability, the Rock is a reminder of the generosity of a quiet, elderly Host. Naqfa is a witness to the fact that Eritrea is an heir to allies of hidden rocks and ravines, crags and crevices, springs and streams. Moreover, the rocky ascents and descents around Naqfa are, or should be, reminders to Eritreans of the ups and downs of fortune that any community is bound to encounter along the path of its history. To be

9 T. Fekadu, p.96

aware of these things and let them form one's thinking is to be wise in a quiet and lasting way. It is to listen to the voice that summons to gratitude and humility.

“By the way, where are *we* now?” This was Berhana's question to Dr. Tekeste, almost on the eve of the fall of the town on The Rock. Let us face it: Without the “we” of this question and all that it implies in terms of a common vision, a common commitment, and a common forging ahead, a small, struggling country like Eritrea would be in a sad shape. Without this “we”, this inner cement, this substratum of solidarity, rooted, nurtured and promoted consciously, along the length and breadth of the country, Eritrea runs the risk of squandering its hard won gains. It has no greater resource, no better weapon. To say so is not to indulge in self-worship, demagoguery or belligerence. It is simply to pay homage to the aspirations of generations of Eritreans, old and young who longed and paid dearly for the preservation of self-respect.

Peace and blessings

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