

The Story of Keren its Origin, Development and Eritrean Contributions



By Abrahaley Habte

To an Eritrean, Keren is home to different ethnic groups, living harmoniously. To an expatriate, if he or she has some clue about recent world history, and especially about the Second World War, Keren may bring to his or her mind the fierce battle between the British and the Italians in 1941.

He or she may recall that the British didn't do it for us. He may reflect that Keren was the fight of two elephants. He or she may recall that the British promised Eritrean askaris in the Italian army, who deserted the Italian army in droves, freedom. He may also recall that the British failed to keep their promise and that we had to do it for ourselves.

On May 8, 2019 Eritrea Profile had a story about Keren, in which it reported that the Anseba Zone Culture and Sports Branch was working hard to get ancient and historical buildings in the city into the UNESCO World Heritage List, to which Asmara has gone into some time ago. In 'Initiative to Put Keren's Ancient Building in World Heritage List' Eritrea Profile reported that the city has ancient buildings from the Turkish Empire and the Italian Colonial Era. As Mr. Siraj Haj, the Director General of the Anseba Branch of the Culture and Sports Commission has noted Keren's history goes hundreds of years, long before the coming of the Europeans to East Africa.

Keren's beginnings are obscure. Little is known about its early history, and how and by whom it was established. It is not clear, too, when it was established. Mebrahtu Abraham, an Eritrean historian, explains that Keren in Bilen, one of the Eritrean languages spoken in Keren, means stony or rocky and the same word means mountain in Tigrigna, another language spoken in that part of Eritrea and the highlands. Despite the absence of

information about its early history, it seems clear that the inhabitants of the city and its surrounding contributed to its blossoming as a regional town in the early to mid-19th century.

In *Red Sea Citizens*, Jonathan Miran gives some picture about the Keren of the 1840 to 1860s. In it, Jonathan Miran writes in the 1840s the Mensa produced excellent wheat and barley, and the Bilin (Bogos) cultivated corn and tobacco, which they sold at the market in Keren.

Often, the contributions of Eritreans are underestimated, even ignored, when Eritrean colonial history is told. Often, many articles on Asmara's beginnings tend to forget the contributions of Eritreans. Such articles erase Eritreans completely out of the picture as if they were not part of the picture. It is true that due to the fact that the Italians denied Eritreans sound education, they may not have contributed in planning, designing, and other aspects, which require knowledge in modern architecture, planning, and engineering. However, this doesn't mean that they didn't contribute to their town's development in other ways. It is the other ways that these articles completely ignore, and give the Italians centre stage, and make them the protagonist in the development story of our towns. It is the same with the story of Keren. But history tells us otherwise.

In *Red Sea Citizens*, Jonathan Miran writes that the naibs, the representatives of Turkish colonialism in Eritrea conducted forceful expeditions - often in tandem with Ottoman forces - against populations in the Hamassien, Mensa, and Bogos areas, showing the Turks didn't have a settled administrative structure in these areas.

Many naib families left the Hirgigo area and turned to trade between the Red Sea Coast and the White Nile, which they dominated after their influence and power waned in the Red Sea Coast. Bringing in ivory from the Nile region, and wax and coffee from Metemma in the Ethiopia-Sudan border, they used Keren as a transit town, which involved it not only in the local trade but also in the long distance trade between Africa and Asia. This trade activity involved the people around in the trade activity, opening them to the influence of others. For example, to deliver these goods the Jengeren provided commercial transportation services between Keren and Massawa. Similarly, Massawa and Hirgigo traders used the Habab cameleers in the 1850s and 1860s for similar purposes. These dominated camel caravan transportation into the 20th century, and provided their services to Italian colonial authorities in Massawa.

Taking into their advantage the fertile area around the Anseba Valley, different groups (Mensa, the Bet Juk, the Bilin, and the Marya) brought their agricultural products to different places along the Massawa- Kassala route such as Meshalit region, the Shi'ib plain (Mensa), Ayn (Habab), Wasntet (Bet Juk), but it was Keren, as a regional market, that received

the bulk of the goods. The Mensa were reported to produce excellent wheat and barley, and the Bilin (Bogos) cultivated corn and tobacco.

At about this time, in Keren, Barka and Bogos goods exchanged, and the town served as a meeting place of local traders. As can be expected, and as often happens, the trade activity around Keren drew the people around into its orbit, and involved them in the trade traffic. Different kinds of people got involved in the production, transportation and distribution of goods. People brought their hides, butter, milk, camels, cows, and agricultural products and exchanged them for cloths and manufactured goods. People closer to Massawa took their goods to the port directly. Others, much farther away, brought their goods to the market in Keren, which was taken to Massawa later on. The Habab brought camels, goats and cow hides, butter, animal fat, and other provisions required at Massawa. Butter required in Arabia was exported to that place. In the 1840s, the Bilin traded almost exclusively with Massawa, buying cloth, drapes, and rugs in exchange for oxen. Speaking of Keren of the 1850s, Giuseppe Sapeto describes it as a meeting place of traders from Gash, Shendi, and Damer, capital of ancient Meroe. The traders came to and brought cotton from Sinnar and Egypt to sell it there.

In this interaction, transportation played an important role, and Keren served as a place where traders changed their camels. The traders chose their camels according to the kind of terrain they were planning to take. Traders travelling to Barka, with its flat terrain, chose camels suitable for such kind of topography. On the other hand, merchants travelling from Keren towards Massawa, chose Habab camels, which are more suitable for the terrain.

Topography and the fertile area near the town, coupled with favorable conditions, drove the development of Keren as a market town. For example, pastoralist and agro-pastoralist societies of the region produced products for exportation, and for the growing markets in the town and Massawa. Indians preferred the Kassala-Massawa route to the Sawakin route because it was closer for eastbound shipping, which must have heightened the importance of Keren. At the same time, Massawa served as a transit town for slaves (from East Africa) to Arabia or other parts of the world. Similarly, the traders preferred the Massawa- Keren route because the high land route was less secure and caravan fees were too high in the other routes. Seeing its potential as an agricultural area and its strategic location, Werner Munzinger, acting as French consular agent at Massawa, wrote in the 1860s: "Bogos is the centre of the large province of Ainseba. Possession of it is important if only for its fertility. But it is also the only camel route from Massawa to the Sudan. Possession of it means the control over the provinces of the Barka, Marea Bedjouk (Christians) whose resources are large and are capable of increasing a hundredfold in a short time. This province, if well administered, would be the flower of the Egyptian Sudan."

At this time, as a transit town between the important Kassala- Massawa trade route, Keren played a crucial role in the trade between Africa and Asia. The route didn't link only today's Sudan and Eritrea but stretched further into West and Northern Africa. In a traffic that involved the trade of different goods between African merchants and their Indian and Arab counterparts, Keren as a 'sub-station' relayed goods originating in the Sudan and beyond, including slaves, ivory, hippopotamus teeth, gold, wax, gum, honey, tamarinds, dates, and ostrich feathers to Massawa. Giuseppe Sapeto, an Italian priest, writes about Keren as an important regional town and centre of trade activity in the area. Speaking of Muslim missionaries at the time, he writes: "... The chief town of their mission is Keren, the meeting place of the traders from Gash and Massawa, from where they monopolize both commodities and souls (consciences)."

Keren's role as a transit town began even earlier, and involving people from further afield, as distant as North and West Africa, in a trans Sahara trade network, linking Asians and Africans in business. Crossing Bornou, Bagrimi, Darfur, Kordofan, and Sinnar, the trade route that originated in Northern and West Africa stretched up to Eastern Sudan, which is then linked up to Massawa or Sawakin in the Sudan, which relay the goods to Asia. Goods originating in the Sudan and beyond, which included slaves, ivory, hippopotamus teeth, gold, wax, gum, honey, tamarinds, dates, and ostrich feathers from Sinnar and Kassala arrived in Massawa. Caravans brought ostrich feathers, ivory, and butter from the Hadendoa regions in the Sudan and butter and mats from the Barka region.

But goods moved in the opposite direction, originating either in India or Arabia. The goods bypassed the Central and Northern highlands of Eritrea, and used the more convenient route of Mensa, Habab, Ad Temaryam, Meshalit, Bet Juk, Bilin, and Marya, and through the lowlands of Barka, where the Beni Amer lived. The traders preferred this route because security was precarious through other routes and the caravan fees were too high. In the movement of goods from Asia to Africa, traders from Massawa came to Keren to exchange various Indian textiles for butter, ivory, hides, ostrich feather, and other goods that were taken back to the port for exportation. In the opposite direction, long-distance caravans from Massawa to Kassala carried mostly a variety of Indian cloths and manufactured products.

It was not only trade but religious pilgrimage also played its role. Pilgrimage to Mecca played its role in the development of Keren as a transit town, second only to Massawa in the trade that involved Eritrean lowlands. Jonathan Miran writes that the Takuriris in Eritrea and Eastern Sudan were an example of people who set off on the journey to reach Mecca on a pilgrimage but settled in East Africa. Jonathan Miran adds Kassala linked Sudanese regional markets at Shendi, Khartoum, Sinnar, Gedarf, Metemma, and Gondar, in the Ethiopian highlands. As the Kassala

to Massawa trade made use of Keren, it possibly benefitted from the trade that passed to Massawa.

The Egyptians, who put Kassala under their control in 1840, took Keren in June 1872. This must have been a turning point for Keren as the rivalries between the Egyptians, the Ethiopians, and the Italians resulted in slowing down of trade activities in the mid-1880s. The Egyptians turned it into a garrison town to secure the territory between Kassala and Massawa, which they took over from the Turks in 1865. The Egyptians crept into highland Eritrea and fought the Ethiopians at Gurae (in 1876) and at Gudent near Adi Quala (in 1875). In 1880, the Egyptians, aided by Degiat Bahta Hagos, mobilized 7, 000 soldiers in an attempt to block Ras Alula and the escape of his army of 12, 000 men out of the Anseba Valley, which he raided and from which he took "ten thousand head of cattle". In other words, Keren and the area around it turned into a conflict zone, with Alula raiding the area annually. Since peace and development go hand in hand, Keren must have suffered economically.

Before the occupation of Keren by the Italians in 1889, Italian and Swedish missionaries brought Catholicism and Protestantism to the area. To preach effectively, the Italian missionaries built a seminary in Keren. Similarly, the Swedish built a school in Gheleb. Keren had the first printing press in Eritrea in 1878, which was transferred to Asmara in 1899.

Keren has many historical places, two of which are the Italian and British war Cemeteries. Reading Mebrahtu Abraham's little book, Keren: Its Origin and Development, and especially the part on the Second World War, one comes to the knowledge of what it means to be under colonial rule. Referring to the Italian War Cemetery in Keren, which is divided into Eritrean Askaris' and Italian soldiers' sections, Mebrahtu Abraham writes: "On the snow-white marbles, the names and ranks of the war dead are inscribed. In the Italian Section, almost 88% are properly documented and the names of the fallen soldiers are clearly inscribed. Whereas in the Eritrean section 99% have no names, ranks, etc. The word "Ascaro Igneto" (Unknown Soldier) was simply inscribed on the marble." In another section, Mebrahtu Abraham reminds us, living under the Italians, the Eritreans didn't even have the right to education. Speaking of Salvaggio Raggi, one of the first schools in Eritrea established by the Italians, he writes: "The school was well equipped and had different shops: wood work, mechanics, saddlery and printing. There was also a department for training telegraph operators and typists. Students could join any one of the shops according to their wishes and aptitudes. Nevertheless, they were to be loyal to their Italian masters and selected by the Italians themselves."

Mebrahtu Abraham states that Keren has many historic buildings – places of worship, schools, offices, some so beautiful they should be preserved for future generations. Though the historical buildings in Keren include

structures from the Egyptian and other periods, buildings built during the Italian period dominate. In their attempts to build an Eastern Africa Empire, which was made evident by their invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-1936, the Italians had no intention of leaving Eritrea. For this reason, they (with significant Eritrean labour) built Eritrean cities such as Asmara and Keren in the image of their cities. Their miscalculations of the balance of power in Europe put them at loggerheads with the Allied Powers, which pushed them out of East Africa.

The buildings in Keren have stories to tell. Some of them were built immediately after the Egyptians left. One or two are even older. Many were built during the Italian Colonial period and tell of the racism of Fascist Italian policies. Still others point to the religious dimension of our past, showing the roots of our religious life, and the influences that shaped our beliefs. Other buildings tell of the interaction we had with other peoples, around and far away.

Writing about Keren and the contributions of the Eritrean people in building the city, I cannot help but recall a few words from Bertolt Brecht's short but powerful poem, *A Worker Reads History*, an insightful commentary on history and history writing. "Who built the seven gates of Thebes? The books are filled with names of kings." writes Brecht. "Was it the kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?"

In Eritrean colonial history, written by foreigners, the names of Italian colonizers – their generals, prime ministers, and colonial governors and their achievements have filled the pages. It is proper to ask: Were there no Eritreans? Who built Eritrean cities, Eritrean factories, the Eritrean rail and ropeways, and Eritrean roads?