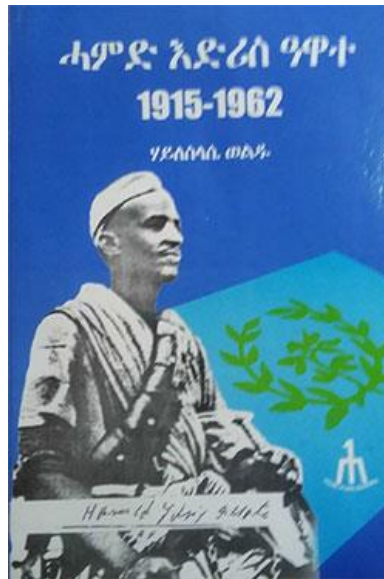


## Hamid Idris Awate, the legend



### **Interview conducted by:**

**Billion Temesghen**

When one day in the future the world learns about the brigand you really are it will despise you!" Hamid Idris Awate told the English colonizers. Under the British administration industries, radio stations, railways, cable wagon and other assets were dismantled from Eritrea and sold to other countries before Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. Hamid fought against it. He is the Eritrean real life Robin Hood.

Hamid Idris Awate is an Eritrea legend whose legacy is associated with the beginning of the Eritrean Armed Struggle. Mr. Hailelassie Woldu, a veteran journalist, spent 35 years of his life researching and writing a historical piece on the biography of Hamid Idris Awate. As a biography, it is the first of its kind in Eritrea. It is an accurate account of Hamid's life based on interviews the author conducted with Hamid's family and people who came close to Hamid as well as written documents attesting to his valor.

- **-Thank you for your time, Mr. Haile. Let us start with an introduction of Hamid Idris Awate?**

Hamid Idris Awate is an Eritrean legend. He is known as the instigator of the Eritrean armed struggle against colonizing forces. A descendent of Tigre and Nara ethnic groups, he was a man of pride. He was proud of his origins and stood very strongly against colonizing forces. He was also opposed to the idea of Eritrea being annexed to Ethiopia. He believed in the sovereignty of his country and his people. He fought and lived for it.

The book is a historical biography about Hamid and his life narrated in five stages: his childhood, serving as an Italian soldier –taking parts in the wars of Kisd kare, Adiwa, Adi Remets and Amoragedel, his life during the English colonization, during the federation with Ethiopia and finally his life at the beginning of the Eritrean Armed Struggle for Liberation and his contribution towards it.

As a child Hamid was curious. His father had taught him how to use weapons since a young age. He was free-spirited and revolutionary. He was very much aware of the reality surrounding him. He believed in an independent African country.

- **-What urged you to write the biography? What did you want to achieve by putting out such a book?**

When in 1958 the “Eritrean flag” was replaced by that of Ethiopia and Eritrea was made ‘the 14th province of Ethiopia’, many Eritreans were in despair. Demonstrations were being organized and people expressed their discontent. In that moment talks of Hamid Idris Awate, a hero from the Eritrean lowlands, rebelling against the Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea, spread all over Eritrea. As a child, I was mesmerized by what I heard about him. The tales about him back then portrayed Hamid as an invincible and immortal being. So, this is the reason I started writing the book. However, I came to realize the aim much later. And my aim in writing this book was to give life to a historical book written based on research and facts in order to compile accurate descriptions of Hamid Idris Awate. There is so much, mostly folktales that is told about him and his link to the beginning of the Eritrean Armed Struggle. I needed to put out a book of facts to contradict the mendacities.



- **-The book was a project that took 35 years of your life. You a lot of research and conducted several interviews with Hamid’s family members, friends, compatriots and people that have**

## **memories of him. What were some of the challenges you faced in the process?**

I started writing this book when I joined the armed struggle. But as we were in war and I wasn't stable, I wasn't able to collect information about him and write. In 1981, I had an opportunity to write a thirty-one-page-long piece based on the few materials I had gathered and sent it to the radio of the front, 'Dimtsi Hafash'. Later on, after the 6th offensive, I was assigned to the Front's information division and there I had the liberty to focus on the project. Since then until its publication in 2018, I spared a lot of time to use in the making of the book. Nevertheless, I didn't spend day and night on it. I had to work and lead my life too. I did face a lot of challenges, of course. Many of my interviewees would die before I'd get a chance for a second interview, some interviewees would exalt themselves to match the accounts of Hamid and that would push me to conduct a separate research on the person to see if the facts are accurate. Furthermore, I always had someone to translate the language for me; many interviewees would be wearied of the translations. Moreover, at the beginning I couldn't offer much to the interviewees. I had nothing to offer them. Some other times, many would unnecessarily link my intentions to political views so they would refuse to tell me anything about Hamid because I was with the E.P.L.F. The biggest challenge, however, was tackling the parable about him as a brigand. He was not and finding accountable material and sources on this specific aspect was challenging. The list goes on.

- **-If you are to clear the odds once and for all through our page, what would you say to those who say that Hamid was a mere brigand?**

He was not. To make the story short, what had happened was by some incident some people came to Hamid and his friends seeking help from bandits. He and his friend were handy with weapons; so Hamid went to help. Meanwhile, a police commissioner called Mr. Dodo came and decided to arrest all of them despite the fact that people asserted that Hamid had gone there to help. That is how Hamid pointed his weapon to the officer and run away. This was the incident. He hated the English. In fact when they called him a "bandit" he would dare to tell them they were the real bandits stealing the properties of Eritrea. Hamid was on the run from 1942 to 1951. It is all mentioned in the book. In 1951, when Enzo Matenzo arrived to Eritrea to declare the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, a general amnesty was given through a decree to bandits for fear that they would cause trouble. Hamid refused to surrender. In fact the then police commissioner of Eritrea, Colonel Cracknell, went personally, along with his troops –which included Eritreans soldiers as well -- to meet and hold talks with Hamid. Colonel Cracknell did put in writing his meeting with Hamid and attests to the strong political stand of Hamid. He was not a bandit; he was a politically seasoned man of reason. He

called Hamid a true follower of Ibrahim Sultan. Hamid loved nature and respected plants, regarding them a resource of a country. He punished anyone that would bring a tree down. Hamid blamed the English for all the goods the English sold to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other countries. The English dismantled even hospitals saying Africans don't need hospitals. According to Cracknell, Hamid drew his sword to the Eritreans who came with Colonel Cracknell calling them "their country's traders". I found the piece in 2002 and have put it in the book elaborating the inaccuracies illustrating Hamid as a bandit and not a political legend.

- **-Does the 1st of September 1961 accurately mark the beginning of the Eritrean Armed**

It is the officially chosen date. It is also accurate. But the understanding of many is not. People think September 1st 1961 refers to the very first day Hamid and his comrades fought against the Eritrean police in Adal. However, that is wrong. The war of Adal was fought on 26th September 1961. Journals and newspapers from that time, in fact, date the war of Adal to the 26th. On September 1st, Hamid left his home, bought some things from a shop in Hademdeme, shot a bullet in the air and promised never to look back home. That is what September 1st is.

- **-Where do you want to see your book most, in the shelves of schools, libraries or bookshops?**

I want the youth to read the book, learn from it and be proud of their history.

- **-Thank you for your contribution to the Eritrean history!**

Thank you!

**Eritrea Profile**