

**“Though I am not a biological mother to any
I am a mother to many”**



Fqadu Luqas

Interview conducted by: Ruth Abraham

One of the profound values of a society like ours is marriage and children. After birth, a person grows, becomes an adult and replicates before getting old and die. Many societies weigh a person's worth based on whether they have kids or not. Fqadu Luqas, mostly known as Gual Luqas, is a former freedom fighter that has something to say about this through her experiences as a fighter and a woman. Gual Luqas fought battles, alongside her comrades, for independence and later in the 1998 war and worked at the children care center for the 23rd brigade from 1981 to 1983.

Gual Luqas, how did your story of struggle begin?

The time I was born was not suitable for a stable life because of the Ethiopian colonization. Like many young Eritreans, I was at risk of being hunted by the Derg. Is that why you joined the armed struggle? Yes, mostly. I joined the struggle in 1975. But before that, as I mentioned earlier, people my age were being detained or killed. The situation was not convenient for someone like me who was agile and resilient as a teenager. That is why my mother sent me to

Dirfo, a village on the road to Massawa, to hide along with a friend of mine. She planned to send us food through the tradesfolk of the village for they could freely move to and from Asmara. Later on I went to a place called Fah to get military training. This is how I began the journey of the struggle.

How did you get to the children care center?

During the sixth offence, I was placed to go to Barka with my brigade, the 23rd brigade. While I was on the way, I was summoned back to Halibet, a place where the brigade's clinic was located. The number of pregnant women was increasing day by day. I was a barefoot doctor at the time and I think that was one of the reasons I was chosen to be in charge of those children and their mothers. Luckily, I naturally liked children and I grew more attached to the children that we had in the field.

Can you give us a general picture of the children care center?

There had been a children's center at the Sewra School. But then it was decided that each brigade should manage its children and pregnant women. At the beginning there were few children and were managed by the respective brigades' clinics in which they were born. But when the number of pregnant women and newborns surged, it became difficult to handle because, the women and children naturally needed extra care and a more centralized management to attend to them. Each brigade had to deal with such a challenge because the children and their "Though I am not a biological mother to any, I am a mother to many" Ruth Abraham Gual Luqas One of the profound values of a society like ours is marriage and children. After birth, a person grows, becomes an adult and replicates before getting old and die. Many societies weigh a person's worth based on whether they have kids or not. Fqadu Luqas, mostly known as Gual Luqas, is a former freedom fighter that has something to say about this through her experiences as a fighter and a woman. Gual Luqas fought battles, alongside her comrades, for independence and later in the 1998 war and worked at the children care center for the 23rd brigade from 1981 to 1983. mothers had to move around with their brigade, especially during war times. Then after much discussion, the leadership decided to set up a children care center in the liberated areas. Our brigade's care center was in Halibet. It is

a mountainous area and the valleys served us as hiding places during bombardments.

How did you manage the center in such a chaotic war zone?

It was hard, of course. Children are sensitive by nature and it was neither a suitable time nor good place to raise children but it was a call of nature. You cannot tell people to fight their nature. We were not far enough from the enemy-occupied lands, so we encountered several attacks. As fighters, they wanted to get over with the two years in Halibet and go back to fight alongside their comrades. But they still had trouble parting from their children. Though we had to go through a lot as a whole, we had no problems in internal management. If a mother had to go carry out a duty, the one in charge, that is, the caretaker of the day, would feed, cloth, wash, protect and entertain the children.

What about the basic needs of the children?

Though we couldn't afford luxurious life, the front provided us with DMK (locally made protein rich diet), and other food stuff. Later on, after I left the center, they suggested that the mothers start growing vegetables and fruits and breeding goats and sheep to satisfy the needs of the children. It was approved and they managed to do it in a short time. This helped the center to provide the children and the pregnant women with nutritious food. We built a couple of houses for them and, they had good quality clothes as well. With help from Eritreans everywhere, the front never let the kids get hungry or cold.

What challenges did you encounter during your stay there?

We had challenges, of course. But I believe we had done all we could to care for those vulnerable parts of our struggle. The mothers were mostly great fighters and they needed no direction. They were very cooperative. The only thing that we couldn't protect our children from was the anxiety of the deafening sound created during bombardments. But personally I enjoyed staying there with the children; it was nice to be part of that center though I didn't stay there for so long.

As you mentioned earlier, after marriage was legalized, many married and conceived children. Have you married or got any you children?

I had a boyfriend in the field but he was martyred. After a while, I got married but, unfortunately, we couldn't take it long; we got divorced. As for conceiving, I can give you two answers to the question. By de facto I have many children, but biologically I have got no children. I get asked this question quite often. Some get disappointed; some give me a sympathetic sad face while others try to console me after they hear my story. Though I am not a biological mother to any, I am a mother to many. After independence, you were still young enough to get married and make a family of your own.

What happened?

After independence, I was demobilized and started to work here and there. I rented out a cafeteria at the Asmara Stadium and started to earn a living. But with the Ethiopian aggression in 1998, I had to go to the battle again. Then when things settled down, I was given a shop in Asmara where I am still working. So, doing all that, I really didn't have time to think about marriage. Marriage and having children don't just happen. You need to come across someone that is worth starting life with and there was no one.

Do you have any regrets about not having children?

I don't have any regrets. Of course there are natural familial needs that a person craves. But those needs are fulfilled by my comrades and the children that I raised in the children care center. They filled the possible gaps that could be created due to loneliness. They were my family in the field and they still are.

Tell me, what is the purpose of having children besides continuing one's generation?

Well, I think it is the love and affection that you exchange with the children from the time they are born. You raise and love them to be great people and they care for you when you need it. People are expected to have children at a certain stage of their life. In our culture, this is particularly emphasized for women.

How do you cope?

In situations like this, one cannot be expected to explain to everyone. But whenever necessary I try to explain that it is a good thing to have children but

not doing so is not necessarily a taboo either. Most of the time, the elderly people are the advocates of reproduction. It is undeniable that reproduction is the foundation of human existence. That is why I don't blame our elders for being strict about having children, contributing to continuing human generation. On the other hand, reproduction is not the only purpose in life. Of course, it is not easy to explain this to many people; so, I usually just let it go. I know no matter how strongly these prejudices are held, we need to be able to neutralize the extremism and provide people with better perspective about one's reason for existence. Honestly, the opposite of good is not always bad, it could also be better. This is to say that having kids is a good thing but not having children to be able to fulfill a better purpose is honorable.

Thank you, Gual Luqas. I wish you well!

My pleasure.

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