

Visiting the past to embrace the future



By:Simon Weldemichael

Citizens' awareness of history has a paramount importance to the maintenance and enhancement of national identity. History enriches human experiences, improves the thinking capacity and also breeds new ideas that profoundly contribute to nation building. Understanding and remembering the past promotes collective memory, which should be communicated to present and future generations.

The collective memory can be communicated through the performance of different activities and various channels. Visiting historical places is one way of activating national collective memory. Towards that end, on 12th March 2020, seven hundred Eritreans, the majority of whom were young men and women, from all ministries spent the night in the trenches of Nakfa. During the event veteran fighter Lt. Colonel Tesfay Gebru briefed the visitors on how the Nakfa front was formed. Freedom fighters among the visitors shared their experiences during the struggle at the front, and some of the young visitors recited more than a dozen poems that reflect the determination of freedom fighters and the tenacity of the Eritrean people. Then in small groups they set camp fires and chatted and cracked jokes, reminiscent of the gedli tradition of coming together to keep warm and unwind. The night was filled with echoes of laughter.

Nakfa front, which is known by Eritreans as a place of resilience, holds a central place in the struggle for the independence of Eritrea. After EPLF's strategic withdrawal its military strategists' decision to make Nakfa front the last line of defense was a show of military brilliance. EPLF's strategic withdrawal ended with the creation of fronts at Nakfa, North Eastern Sahel and Halhal. Nakfa front and its complex trenches that altered the physical geography of the place demonstrate the intelligence, talent and diligence of the freedom fighters.

Nakfa is a historical place that has the main ingredients of the Eritrean national identity. The events that happened in and around Nakfa touch the life of every Eritrean. The total number of freedom fighters who fell in Nakfa was by far greater than any who fell in other battlefields in Eritrea. Nakfa is an open space museum, a depository of our collective memory, a sacred national center and a site for national pilgrimage.

The initiative taken by the 700 participants of the 22nd round of the Cadre School to visit and spend the night in the trenches helped them to experience the place and its artifacts which they could interpret through their own senses. Nakfa represents the symbolic and material aspects of the Eritrean struggle for independence. As it was the base of the EPLF, the preservation of the personnel, armaments and other supplies, and, above all, the Eritrean revolution depended on its defense. As a tribute to its significant role during the struggle for independence, Eritrea's currency is named Nakfa.

Remembering and visiting the past is essential for various reasons. In the first place, remembering the events that happened and visiting Nakfa are tied profoundly to our sense of national identity. Without a collective memory, the sense of self, identity and history is lost. In today's age of deception, history, just like any valuable commodity, is subjected to distortion, alteration and theft. The Eritrean national history and identity, although validated practically and ideologically, can be contested if we fail to protect it from spoilers.

One of the visitors at Nakfa front said, "In order to embrace the future it's our responsibility to study, understand and protect our past." Another young woman said, "The whole night we have not only communicated among each other, we also had a conversation with our martyrs and our past. As a result, I've personally renewed my commitment." Ayda Tewelde, one of the organizers of the visit, also said, "It's our past that ties us together."

National identity can be maintained and reinforced through tangible and intangible cultural heritage. There are nations around the globe that are identified with a particular site, monument or prominent figure. For example, Egypt is identified with the pyramids, India with the Taj Mahal and China with the great wall. Similarly, Eritrea can be made to be identified with Nakfa. Therefore, the relics of the struggle for independence that make Nakfa unique and irreplaceable should be carefully preserved.

The PFDJ Cadre School in Nakfa makes efforts to help people understand their cultural heritage and history so that they can understand the world in which they live. History is taught in the school along with other subjects that touch on economics, culture, politics, philosophy and law. Besides the formal education, the school plays a major role in introducing and

promoting the cultural heritage of the Eritrean revolution. The education of the PFDJ Cadre School assists learners to increase awareness of their cultural identities, history and traditions. It plays a great role in informing, sensitizing and drawing participants' attention to the core national, regional and international issues.

The courses are given by top government officials and scholars from various fields.

Nakfa has a tremendous potential for historical and cultural tourism. It is endowed with numerous cultural heritage assets such as trenches, underground houses and museum. Looking at the complex trenches, a veteran fighter who spent the night in the Nakfa trenches with the youth said, "This is ours and it must be preserved with proper care. It is an essential aspect of our identity." Eritreans experience the natural and cultural heritage of Nakfa as a place of struggle. The grand national story that is respected, remembered and reiterated by all Eritreans is tailored in Nakfa. It was during the liberation struggle that Eritreans coordinated their efforts towards a common goal.

Adem Mohamed, one of the organizers of the visit, said, "The night cemented our mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs and mutual vision." Another participant also said, "We did it to honor those who suffered and died here during the war of liberation." After expressing his satisfaction with the motivation of the members of the 22nd round, Mr. Yohannes Keleta, director of the PFDJ Cadre School, said, "This is one activity done to preserve the memory related to the struggle for the making of the nation. Our history is facing more challenges than ever before, but we are confident that we have the skills, creativity and means to protect it."

Shabait.com