

Yohannes Naffe Passes Away in Eritrea, But No One Was Around to Tell His Tale

By
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Death announcements and short obituaries that appear in the local PFDJ newspaper, *Hadas Eritrea*, may not interest many. Nor would people think that many of the portraits in the obituary columns of that little-read newspaper mean a lot to the Eritrean struggle and its achievements that are nowadays hijacked and temporarily “possessed” by a home-grown monster and his ever shrinking circle of evil men.

Not long ago, a friend informed me about the death of Yohannes Naffe (NaffiE) Mindal on 7 February 2008. That name meant a lot to me and wanted to know if the sole newspaper in Asmara wrote something about his death, at least an announcement by the family. To this end, and for the first time in recent years, I spent sometime in PFDJ's Shabait.com rummaging around the inside pages of several online issues of *Hadas Eritra* for a death announcement and a portrait of someone I knew.

And there it was – his portrait - in an inside page of the 27 February 2008 issue of *Hadas Eritra*, alongside a very short message from his widow, Miriam Ghebru, thanking all visitors to their home and participants in the funeral procession that carried his remains to his home village of Musha, across River Ansaba in Keren.



I knew Yohannes in the early 1960s – he in his 50s and me in my teens. And in spite of the age difference, we were friends. Yohannes was one of the little known and little appreciated patriots, whose small efforts added up to finally make Eritrea a sovereign state. Yohannes communicated with student leaders of the day and in his own ways inspired them to do what youth must do: demonstrate and stoke the smoldering fires for a winning national liberation struggle.

Many of that generation - my generation - may recall at least the March 1965 massive student demonstration that rocked Asmara for a week and led to the imprisonment of over 2,000 school children at **Sembel** for nearly 40 hours without food. If you remember or have heard about that significant event, you need to be informed that that event was partly arranged in the house of Yohannes Naffe. It was in his house at the banks of Mai Bela that student leaders from Prince Makonnen Secondary School, from Point Four Technical School and from Haile Selassie Secondary School met and finalized arrangements for that grand demonstration.



Among those who were meeting in Yohannes Naffe's house were Martyr Michael Ghaber, a cousin of Yohannes who lived in that very house; Martyr Seyoum Ogbamichael; Martyr Woldedawit Temesgen; Martyr Mussie Tesfamichael; Eira-Eiro prisoner Haile Woldetensae (DeruE); Tekle Ezaz; today's Dictator Isaias Afworki, and this writer. The contents of leaflets that were to be distributed during the 1965 demonstration were discussed in Yohannes Nafée's house. (General Zeremariam Azazi, the Eritrean Police Commissioner, heard about these meetings but he could do nothing because Yohannes was his friend who gave him shelter while the former was unemployed.)

Michael Ghaber

All the demo placards intended to be used in the March 1965 demonstration – as well as all placards used in the other 1961-65 mammoth student demos in Asmara - were supplied by Yohannes Nafée from his carpentry shop in his house; all the used and unused placards of that period were prepared in his house and with his personal support and encouragement. Daniel Yohannes, his son who joined the ELF in 1965 and was martyred in the late 1960s, was part of the student movement of the day.

Affectionately addressed as 'yeba' by his children and grand-children, Yohannes was a voracious reader of the daily newspapers of the period in Eritrea, especially the Italian papers and magazines, and was eager to narrate on daily basis past events and current developments to young student activists of the day. Yohannes had some difficulty with hearing low voiced chats and usually preferred to go on talking. His supply of facts had great impact in me, in Michael Ghaber and in our generation.

Yet, when Yohannes Nafée Mindal passed away at an advanced age in February 2008, there was literally no one around in Eritrea to tell his tale. But those who were there, including Isaias Afeworki, are the ones who care less to say a word about our passing patriots because they do not want to share with others the credit of liberating the homeland.

'Yeba' was born in Musha in November 1912 and went to school in Gheleb under an Italian missionary, Maestro Coisson, whose family remained friends to Yohannes and family till the end. Yeba, who mostly preferred to talk in Tigre whenever possible, was at one time school director of the Evangelical School of Asmara. But for the rest of his life, he worked as constructor. His family members recall that he built 33 churches of various denominations throughout Eritrea in addition to two major reservoirs, numerous water wells, schools and clinics. After liberation, he built, among other premises, the three-story Yohannes Hotel in Keren.

Yeba fathered 10 children who include Lumumba Yohannes, a PhD holding engineer currently working with the USA Federal Aviation Administration and residing in Oklahoma. Other daughters and sons of Yohannes are graduates in journalism, economics, languages, accounting, nursing and other professions. But when Yeba passed away and buried in his birthplace and the birthplace of my life-time friend,

Michael Ghaber, it was only some of his sons and daughters who could be around to bid him farewell. That is PFDJ's Eritrea.

May Yeba Yohannes' soul rest in peace.

Eternal memory to our patriots.

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