

## Chat Over a Cup of Coffee

By Mussie Bekit and Gherezgher Bekit

On June 26, 2015, we posted an article under the title “**Hjik Eit Re’As Boon**” (Chat over a cup of coffee) that summarily narrated different topics which had an influence on the Mensa people directly or indirectly. This post is a belated loose translation of the article attempting to address the core of the message. We have deviated a bit from the original version of the article for further elaboration on the subject in hopes that our readers, especially our youth, may benefit from the discussion and leave with a glimpse of the historical perspective of the Mensa people. We anticipate that some of our ideas would be thought provoking to open up further discussions.

While having our Eritrean traditional coffee on June 20, 2015, we were talking about a number of issues, including mayorship or Kentebnet (hereinafter referred to as Kentebnet) in the Mensa area, traditional drum or Ngaret (hereinafter referred to as Ngaret) and Eritrean traditional laws and customs.

Since our questions and answers were very similar, we decided to compile our ideas together for publication on Klot Wlad Haighet. Hence, we hereby present our views and opinions to the readers of the website:

### **Brief Background Pre-Kentebnet**

Before modern civilization began, social structure of primitive societies was defined by the head of a household. As times progressed, for their own existence, self-preservation and survival, primitive societies elected chieftains and chieftain of chieftains. As their numbers grew and boundaries expanded, society needed some sort of centralized administration where they could settle disputes among the locals and make rational decisions, which is what led to the birth of judges. Judges had dual responsibilities and their primary role was to preside over proceedings or act as a referee between litigating parties, rendering an independent and impartial assessment of the facts in the pursuit of justice. In addition, they were also responsible for administrative duties.

With the passage of time, authority was concentrated in the hands of one person called Malik who was worshiped and feared by all. The word “Malik” came from the Hebrew word “Malachus” meaning King and the word “King” in Tigre and Arabic is Malik because of its Semitic origin. The establishment of kings removed the judges from their administrative roles and confined them to solely rendering justice. Interestingly enough, the Kingdom of Nimrod was believed to be the first kingdom on earth known to the human race. Nimrod in Hebrew means a rebel or defiant. Thereafter, kingdoms began to spread across the globe, including the Pharaohs in Egypt, the Caesars in Rome, the Hatseys or Emperors in Abyssinia and Naibs (rulers)

of Hirgigo (Massawa coastal areas). Naib in Tigre and Arabic means someone second in command. There were also other titles at the lower echelon such as Kentebay (mayor), Qal Hatsey (mouthpiece of Emperor) and Ende-Rasie (act on my behalf).

The Mensa people were no exception as they governed themselves by a council of elders who were elected by their communities and were guided by Fitih Mehari laws (traditional laws and customs of Mensa) which were handed down by word of mouth. The Fitih Mehari laws were unwritten rules, since historically speaking, the Mensa people were independent and self-sufficient. They resisted repetitive invasions and the desire of conquest from Abyssinia and the highlands of Eritrea and refused to succumb to the rule of their invaders. At times, they refused to pay taxes that were levied on them without their consent which is taxation without representation. Their livelihood was dependent on cattle-raising and substance farming.

The beauty of the landscape coupled with natural resources and cattle wealth drew much attention from the surrounding areas. With two rainy and harvest seasons in a year, cattle and crops were abundant. For instance, to help put it in perspective, one who owned fifty head of cattle at that time was considered depressed or poor. According to Fitih Mehari, people were paying or compensating “victims” 120 head of cattle for punitive damages so paying 120 head of cattle to settle disputes was the standard norm at that time. Haighet was also known for its popular poetic songs. Like any feudal system during that time, the Mensa people were a ruling class known as *‘Shmagle’* meaning land owners.

Professor Adolph Kolmodin (1858-1928), a critic and conservative exegete, visited Mensa at the end of November 1908. Describing the stunning scenery between Mehlab and Gheleb, he had this to say, “On Friday, November 27, 1908, we started our journey from Mehlab. The way to Gheleb is the most beautiful stretch of a country through which one can travel.... It’s a source of wonder to me.” Kolmodin followed the bed of the Gedmai River and he admired the rising mountains, the beautiful trees, and the sweet melodies of all kinds of birds. He revealed his admiration of the lush landscape to Pastor Swenson, his fellow traveler, by saying that the “Roden country (Mensa) is more beautiful than the Swenson country (Tsezega, Hamassen). “

People in the region were invading and harassing each other for cattle and competitive dominance. The Mensa people did their fair share of invading, too, either in retaliation or most probably putting their invaders’ ego in check and there is compelling evidence that the Mensa were under constant threat from areas as far away as Showa. We would like to highlight some of the major invaders under the Abyssinian Monarchy, not necessarily in chronological order, under which Haighet had suffered significant losses.

- 1) Degiat Wube from Amhara (Showa)
- 2) Ras Hailemichael from Hamassien
- 3) Bahata Hagos of Segenaiti from Akeleguzay
- 4) Hatsey Yohannes of Tigrai
- 5) Aksum Gebru- Hatsey Yohannes’s representative

- 6) Ras Wubie
- 7) Ras Alula
- 8) Baramberas Kafel
- 9) Sihul Shum Gragn- invaded twice

Not only did the Mensa people receive losses from the aggressors listed above, they also had this threat of foreign aggregation from Egyptians, Turks and Italians, etc. tucked in the back of their minds, which were common enemies for all the peoples in the region.

### **The Genesis of Kentebnet**

The Abyssinian Monarchy was a relatively more organized “statehood,” if you will, with its modest garrisons and cache of weapons according to the standard of that time. So, the question bears; why did the Mensa leaders go to Abyssinia as well as to the Naibs in quest of Kentebnet? Under the invasion circumstances we cited above, it stands to reason that they had to ally themselves with the Abyssinian Monarchy, the Ra’si of Tigrai, and the Naibs of Hirgigo (rulers of the Massawa area), for security reasons; to receive protection, self-preservation, resiliency, survival skills as well as to thwart any potential threat of foreign invasion. The Mensa people formed alliance by seeking Kentebnet. The protocol of seeking the title of mayorship (Kentebnet) required a person to sit on a bed to receive the title. The bed signified power or authority. The Amharic word “Alga-Werash” and the Tigrigna word “Weras- Arat,” literally translating to “successor of bed” seemed to have derived from that concept.

Upon receiving the title, the Kentebay would receive the following items:

- Black coat of arms, also known as Qamish Kentebay or gown of Kentebay, with gold-plated stitchings around the edge
- Gold solid bracelet
- Gold hair pick (medergef)
- Ngaret (traditional drum)
- Embellished sword and spear
- Priest
- Wata (a one-man band who serenaded for Kentebay and the Mensa people)
- Wereza- Galgalay (advisor or confidant)
- Amet (female slave who prepared Sewa and Mes - local beer and honey wine)

The Naibs awarded all of the above, including Juket (a purple and/or red gown), except a priest, Wata and Amet.

In return, the Abyssinian Monarchy, the Ra’esis of Tigrai and the Naibs of Hirgigo would receive tax revenue they imposed on the Mensa people. The emperor would task the Kentebay to collect taxes from his own people and remit them to him in person. It is clear to note that the monarchy had other motives though. On the surface, it seemed that they were only interested in economic advantages and rallying manpower during foreign aggression, but beneath the

surface lied a number of opportunistic motives, including the ambition of territorial expansion and encroachment and ostensibly gain access to the Red Sea to secure free transit of all merchandise and modern arms. Thus, we could safely conclude, at the bare minimum, that it was an arrangement of mutual benefit and convenience.

As mentioned earlier above, Haighet governed itself through a collective leadership composed of a council of elders elected by the people until power was consolidated in the hands of one man, Kentebay (mayor). Although Kentebay had full authority to preside over court rulings, the vast majority of court cases were settled out of court by arbitration. The Kentebay would appoint a select committee who were sagacious and capable of mediating and resolving conflicts amicably.

The coat of arms or the gown was only worn during court proceedings. The Kentebay had an assistant (Wlad Dyna), serving as a bailiff or secret service agent, who was responsible for carrying the gown and rifle of the Kentebay to Mahaber (court). When Kentebay sits the bench, the bailiff puts the gown on him and then takes it off after the court has been adjourned. Kentebay used to convene a Wa'ala, an annual conference, usually in the month of June to address current issues as well as draft plans for the upcoming year. In the conference, the attendees discussed the allocation or distribution of duties such as the repair of Agim (irrigation canals) in Shieb and an oversight committee would be tasked to oversee the projects and report back the progress to Kentebay.

According to Fitih Mehari, Kentebnet began in the Mensa area during the reign of Emperor Fasilidas of Abyssinia (1632-1667). Although we don't have corroborative evidence, that some books suggest that the word "Kentebay" seems to have originated from the Amharic word Kentiba, meant "treasurer" at that time. As you may know, Kentebnet was widely used in Abyssinia and the highlands of Eritrea before it was introduced to the Mensa area. The Kentebay titles were primarily practiced in Medri Bahari (present Eritrea), Wollo, Begemeder (Gondar), Tigrai and Showa.

Zeriet was the first person to receive the Kentebnet from Hatsey or Emperor Fasil of Abyssinia, but his Kentebnet was short-lived. As he approached the village, he played the Ngaret (traditional drum) to proclaim his title so that the people would give him warm reception and blessings. To his surprise, his arrival was greeted with displeasure. The people gave him a vote of no confidence for the reason that the Kentebnet was supposed to be awarded to Ogbamichael as he was older than him. It was customary that the Kentebnet should be awarded to the oldest person in the community and passed down to the next in line in the family. Instantly upon hearing the news, Ogbamichael traveled to Abyssinia to meet Emperor Hatsey Fasil and express his indignation. He articulated to the emperor that the Kentebnet should have been granted to him instead. Emperor Fasil was convinced by Ogbamichael's reasoning; he ousted Zeriet and replaced him by Ogbamichael. Thus, Ogbamichael became the first officially recognized Kentebay of Haighet and Zeriet was exasperated by the decision. To make matters even worse, he got into an argument with some of the local people and caused

him to leave the area. This action by Emperor Fasil led to the split of the Mensa people, as over the years many of his immediate relatives had followed his footsteps and eventually founded what we know today as Bet Ishahaqan; an exercise of self-determination.

After many years of Kentebnet, there was a vacancy of the position in which Tesfamichael Gebres was administering Mensa without the official title of Kentebay for a while. Since he was preceded in death by his son, Idris, his responsibility of duties was assumed by his grandson, Tedros Idris. At one point, Naib Hassen Idris from Hirgigo traveled to Afabet to tour the area and collect taxes from Ad Timariam, Sahel. The two brothers, Jihad and Adala Wlad Ageba, from Mensa approached the Naib to bid for the Kentebnet that was vacant for some time. They offered him five-hundred head of cattle for the vacant position. When Tedros Idris heard about this news through his brother Elos, who happened to be in the area, he immediately headed to Afabet to confront and outbid them by offering 1,500 head of cattle to the Naib. The brothers misunderstood the offer and withdrew from the race. Tedros received the Kentebnet and went back to Mensa victoriously. We highlighted this example to indicate the magnitude of their wealth and ability of running an effective campaign for power.

At one time, Hatsey Yohannes of Tigray levied taxes to Mensa Bet Abrehe. Back in the days, it was a common and required practice for the Kentebay to deliver the tax collection to the emperor in person. Out of abundance of dignity, pride and defiant behavior, Kentebay Bimnet resisted and went against Yohannes' wishes and orders by saying, "I am too heavy to ride a mule." Nonetheless, Mensa Bet Abrehe sent the tax collection through Kentebay Nashi Jimajanay and Hamed Abelti. However, Yohannes wanted this verified so he sent Aksum Gebru to Hamassien to inquire if this was indeed true. Aksum Gebru wanted Bimnet to come to Hamassien to see him and Kentebay Bimnet refused to see Aksum by saying, "I could not see the face of a simple officer; your master was interested in the collections and it was already sent to him," causing the inevitable to happen; Aksum Gebru got upset about Bimnet's reply and retaliated by invading and looting Mesna.

Now let's take a look at the names of Kenetib (mayors) of two Haightet:

Mayors of Mensae Bet Abrehe:

- 1) Kentebay Ogbamichael
- 2) Kentebay Biemnet
- 3) Kentebay Desit Wed Yegin ( received his mayroship from Naib of Hirgigo)
- 4) Kentebay Tedros Wed Idris ( received his Kentebnet from Naib Hassen of Hirgigo)
- 5) Kentebay Negassi
- 6) Kentebay Tesfamichael
- 7) Kentebay Ogbamichael the second
- 8) Kentebay Bekit

Mayors of Mensae Bet Ishahaqan:

- 1) Shum Tinseaw
- 2) Shum Ghed
- 3) Kentebay Zeriet
- 4) Kentebay Kelib ( received his authority from Naib of Hirgigo)
- 5) Kentebay Iriet ( received his authority from Naib of Hirgigo)
- 6) Kentebay Atkeme ( received his authority from Emperor Fasil)
- 7) Kentebay Dayer
- 8) Kentebay Idris
- 9) Kentebay Timikeal
- 10) Kentebay Tesfamichael wed Kentebay Timikeal
- 11) Kentebay Timariam wed Tesfamichael
- 12) Kentebay Teklenkiel
- 13) Kentebay Amdes wed Kentebay Ogbamichael
- 14) Kentebay Hibtes
- 15) Kentebay Ogbamichael wed Teklehans
- 16) Kentebay Zeriet the second (received his authority from Emperor Iyassu the first)
- 17) Kentebay Zeriet the 6<sup>th</sup> (received his authority from Emperor Mekafa, probably Emperor Fasil)
- 18) Kentebay Bairay
- 19) Kentebay Mohammed
- 20) Kentebay Bula
- 21) Kentebay Aftay
- 22) Kentebay Mohammed

As one would expect, it is imperative to ask why Bet Ishahaqan had more mayors than Bet Abrehe. For some unknown reasons after the passing of Kentebay Desiet, the Kentebnet in Bet Abrehe stalled for a long period of time (see Dgim Kli'e Mensa and Fitih Mehari page 34). Hopefully, this will somehow inspire us to research as to why there was this long interruption.

To provide a perspective on how others in the surrounding areas used their own titles, our cousins in the Maryas area had referred to their Kentebay as Shum. The word "Shum" is derived from the Semitic word "Shem" meaning name, fame, prominent and counselor.

We would like to mention some of Marya's Shums:

- 1) Shum Himed Arey
- 2) Shum Ezuz
- 3) Shum Ibrahm
- 4) Shum Mohamed Abubaker (his brother)...etc.

People from the Barka and Northern Sahel areas of Eritrea had Diglell and Natab titles. The Funji government in Sudan, with their seat of government in Senar, was very powerful. They used to send their representatives with titles of Diglell and Natab to Western and Northern

lowlands of Eritrea to rule and collect taxes. Later, the Egyptians had overthrown the Funji government and most of the Diglells and Natabs remained there and overtime, they got assimilated and acculturated with the local people. The word 'Diglel' in Tigre means an elder and in Belin means leader, wise, gentle and majestic. After 5 years of being ruled by the Egyptians, the Mahedists liberated their land and made their seat of government Khartoum.

The people who live in the Denkeil areas had Sultans, title given by the Turks. The Turks set their foot in Sewakin and later they took full control of Massawa in 1557.

Below is a partial list of the Naibs of the Red Sea:

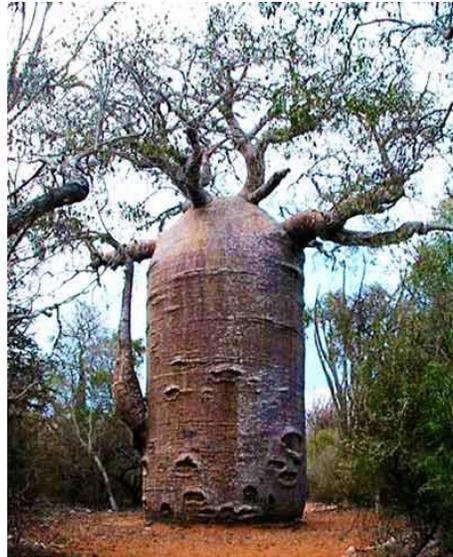
- Naib Amir Ali: 1690-1710
- Naib Hussien Amir: 1710-1737
- Naib Mohammed Amir: 1737-1741
- Naib Osman Amir: 1741-1781
- Naib Ahmed Hassan: 1781-1801
- Naib Idris Osman: 1801-1831
- Naib Yahiya Ahmed: 1831-1837- His nickname Sotel Morahu (a person wears dagger around their waste)
- Naib Osman Idris: 1837-1840
- Naib Yahya Ahmed the 7<sup>th</sup>: 1840-1843
- Naib Hussien Idris: 1844-1849
- Naib Hussien Idris: 1850 1857

At last, Idris Osman the 6<sup>th</sup> became the Naib until he fled to Mensa, his uncle' (his mother's side) land in 1859. We do not know the reason of his flight.

### **Brief Background of Ngaret**

Ngaret (traditional big drum) was believed to be invented during the Axumite Kingdom in Abyssinia. The king had to have a big drum to rally his people during invasion, war and proclamation of important matters.

It was originally made out of species of the baobab tree constructors cut the log of contents to make it hollow a shape or form of a drum. elephant, hippo, buffalo the wooden shell from required extensive oils, and other aloe performance of the drum, trapped inside the wooden shell with the elephant's skin. wooden shell, along with make reverberating



of a log of D'leb (Dima) tree, as shown on this picture. The the tree, extracted its inner inside. The wooden shell took They later stretched and/or rhino skin to cover side-to-side. The skin treaments by applying gums, extacted fluids. To perfect the they allowed enough air to be shell before they covered it The hollowness of the the trapped air inside, helped sounds and resonance

The preparation of the log, stretching of the skin, and treating it with oils, was time consuming and labor intensive. But later due to its weight and difficulty of carrying it from place to place, they began making it out of brass, which was relatively easy for mobility. The drummers had to have the knowledge and skills of the sounds, combinations and rhythms of the drumbeats to effectively create a drum and had to be physically fit to carry the drum.



**Sketch drawing of Ngaret**

Women from Axum, Tigrai, used to chant songs to honor and praise the drummers by reciting below song/poem:

“Take me with you, Oh, Mr. Drummer,  
Give me the word, or a wink would suffice....

And I would pick up my shawl and come,  
Without a word of farewell to my friends  
Not even a 'Good bye' to mom and dad  
I'd sneak out of my home and follow you to Axum  
And rather be a concubine to the king's drummer  
Than a wife to a boring, lousy farmer."

There was another song that went like this:

"Everyone knows the drummer stole my heart

There really is no question or doubt about that

Would someone, kindly ask his wife?

As to what he might have done with it?

Or, where in the world he has hidden it?"

The drum had different kinds of sounds and the beats could be heard from as far as 50 miles or more. The drum was played during five occasions: (1) rallying the people for war (2) rescue mission and pandemic (3) important festivals or holidays (4) proclamation of important matters (5) and death of a prominent person such as a king, a person of authority and elders of the community. The Ngaret served as a newspaper, radio, television, Twitter and other social media of its time. In the Tigre area, the following people were known to be the skilled and reputable drummers: (1) Semara (2) Omer Moselem (3) Frajalah (4) Ali Hassen Seqeunayti (5) Wed Ikid (6) Bahaduray and many more.

### **The introduction of Fitihi Ad Ab (Hgi Enda Aba) or traditional laws**

The traditional laws in Eritrea, specifically in the highlands, began during the reign of Emperor Eksinder (1471-1494) of Abyssinia. It is very obvious that the laws included various codes and customs. Published in 1492, the laws (bylaws) of Logo and Chua seemed to be the oldest. It was authored by priests, elders and leaders of the community. Since then, it has been amended three times: (1) In 1658 during the reign of Emperor Fasil (2) in 1899 during the Italian occupation and (3) in 1943 during the British administration.

Fitih Mehari are the second oldest, after Logo and Chua, traditional laws in Eritrea and has been in existence for over 400 years. It was handed down orally from generation-to-generation since the reign of Fasil in 1632, which was amended once during Kentaby Bimnet. After 10 years of extensive research, C.G. Roden, a missionary from Sweden, was able to publish it in 1913. The book was later translated into Italian. Roden presented the book to the Italian authorities in Rome as a gift and it was widely published without delay in the Italian newspapers as well as

European newspapers. Roden, who was zealously devoted to put Haighet on the map in Europe, has made significant and tremendous contribution to the preservation of the history and traditional laws and customs of the Mensa people. **Despite its incompleteness and insufficiency**, the book, “Kilie Mensa: Dgim Wo Fitih Adotat” (The history, laws and customs of the two Mensa), should be a source of pride to all Eritrean.

After Fitih Meheri, the following traditional laws were introduced:

- 1) Laws of Adegna, Tegeleba of Aqologuzay
- 2) Laws of Adkeme Mligae of Serae
- 3) Laws of Seharti, Lemzan, Weqerti and Denba
- 4) Laws of Habselus and Gebrekristos of Deqi Tashim
- 5) Laws of Karneshim
- 6) Laws of Seven Anseba Zemat Tehatay: Seven Anseba are as follows: Deqi N’Amin, Deqi Hans, Melezenai, Deqi Dashim, Dersenay, Deqi Shehay (brother of Mensai and Maryay) and Deqi Andu.

We perused over the Eritrean traditional codes and bylaws and made an effort to compare Fitih Mehari with the rest of the Eritrean traditional bylaws and in doing so, we have observed some differences. Just to mention a few, while the bylaws of the highland regions were written by individuals with an innate knowledge of laws, priests and elders of the community, Fitih Mehari was crafted from the “constitution” of one man’s mind named Mehari. We have not found any indication that Fitih Mehari was put together by priests, sheiks and/or elders of the community. The highland bylaws have articles stipulating that respect must be paid to a king and priest and violations of these stipulations were punishable by law.

Fitihi Mehari seemed to be original. Most importantly, it delineates the separation of religion and state (administration). Its articles do not mention any language that favors the king, church, sheik or priest. In other words, it does not mention any special treatment of people with authority. Under Fitih Mehari, slaves had rights, sometimes as far as complete emancipation.

We do believe that there are people in this organization who are more knowledgeable than we are and, therefore, we call upon them to present their feedback, input, critiques and criticisms. Any written material, whether it be broadcasted via radio, television and/or published in newspapers, is somehow incomplete. Therefore, it absolutely makes perfect sense to invite criticisms, applaud, contrarian views, corrections and the like. We gladly welcome any input as it helps us broaden our perspective on things.

## **Reference Materials**

- 1) *Kil’ie Mensa: D’gim Wo Fitih Adotat*
- 2) *Higi Enda Aba- Kebbessa*
- 3) *Kenisha, written by Karl Johan Lundstrom & Ezra Ghebremedhi.*
- 4) *Seret Tarik Tintawit Bahre-Gass- Eritrea- by Abraha Paulos, Phd.*

5) *Insight Book*

6) *Tigraionlie.com (the story of Ngaret)*