

**A short biographical sketch
Of
GRAZMATCH LIGIAM ISHAQ**



Grazmatch Ligiam Ishaq was one of the most prominent Eritreans of his time. On top of his capacity and responsibility as a senior government official during the British and Ethiopian eras, he was also a distinguished author, interpreter and linguist in Eritrea.

Grazmatch Ligiam Ishaq Bemnet was born on November 1918 in Mihlab – administrative seat of Mensa Biet-eshihaken located in Zoba Anseba from his father Bashai Ishaq Bemnet Gergis and his mother Wezero Rebiba Tesfankiel Oqbamichael. He was the first child of four sons and six daughters. He was raised by great parents and his father Bashai Ishaq was one of the successful farmers in Mensa. Besides several farming plots in various parts of Mensa, he also owned coffee, fruits & grain growing commercial farm in Mirara. Moreover, he was a respected teacher in the Evangelical Protestant community of Mensa.

In his early school life, Grazmatch Ligiam first went to a Catholic School in Mihlab and then he went to Keren to join as a boarding student in the famous Zere-Kihenet Catholic Seminary School where he studied both academic and clerical subjects. As a promising young student he managed to become one of the few top students of his time to travel to Rome, Italy for further studies. He was the pride of his family and his community as he was one of the few Eritreans and most likely the first one from Mensa Biet-eshihaken to go abroad for higher education during the Italian colonial era.

In September 1934 he was enrolled in *Collegio Ethiopico* at the Vatican City in Rome, where he studied theology, philosophy and standard academic subjects. In 1936, after three years of learning he successfully completed *liceo* and earned a diploma in theology and philosophy. Furthermore, one of the senior teaching staff who noticed the potential and inclination of young Ligiam helped him study accounting for another year in Scuola di Ragioneria in Rome.



Grazmatch Ligiam at a young age in the Vatican in 1935

In 1937 he returned to Asmara, Eritrea. After few months, he landed a job in Banca Cooperativa Popolare Eritrea¹ in Asmara as a ragioniere (accountant) due to his impressive credentials and worked until April 1941. During the fascist Italian colonialist era working as a professional accountant in a bank was quite an incredible achievement.

Since Ethiopia was under Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, Banca Cooperativa Popolare Eritrea started expanding its branches in Ethiopia. Hence, in 1939 Grazmatch Ligiam was one of those who were assigned to open the branch office in Gondar, Ethiopia. After six months of duty in Gondar he came back to Asmara and got married to Weizero Ellen Bilata Domenico Bahlibi² and began enjoying a warm family life.

¹ There were Five Banks, Banca di Roma, Banca d'Italia, Banco di Napoli, Banca Nazionale Del Lavoro and Banca Cooperativa Popolare Eritrea.

² Weizero Ellen was born in 1924 from her father Bilata Domenico Bahlibi, who was director of Printing Press of Eritrean government in the 1950's and from her mother Weizero Dehab Weldelessie in Kidane-Mehret Asmara. Weizero Ellen was educated in Scuola Vittorio Emanuele up to 4th grade during Italian times. She was an exemplary loving mother.



Grazmatch Ligiam and Weizero Ellen's wedding at the Kidane Miheret Church, Asmara in 1940

In 1941, the British forces captured Eritrea after defeating the Italian Army and placed it immediately under British Military Administration. The British were unprepared for the civilian administration and responsibilities hence, the first thing they did was to suspend most institutions and administrative activity for a short period of time. However, they closed all the Italian banks for good and replaced them by a British bank (Barclays Bank). The Italian and Eritrean bankers were replaced by Indian and Sudanese bureaucrats. The British also replaced the Italian currency (lire) by the East African shilling.

Grazmatch Ligiam had no choice but to change his profession and get employed in the British run Department of Transport as an administrative assistant (located in the then Auto Parco and the present day Eri-equip), which provided service to government institutions. Since his job required him to travel in Eritrea and the Sudan, Grazmatch Ligiam was among the very few Eritreans to acquire a 2nd grade driving license issued in 1937. It is also important to note that, in order to fit with the British administration he had to take accelerated English courses in the evenings, and soon developed a good command in the English language.

After working for a few years with the British administration Grazmatch Ligiam went abroad to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1946 and accepted a position as an accountant in the Finance Department with the Ministry of Defense, known at that time as “TOR Minister” or Ministry of War. His stay in Addis gave him the opportunity to note the wide differences between Eritrea and Ethiopia, in terms of the people’s political awareness, modern methods of administration and the level of industrialization & economic development. Ethiopia lagged far behind Eritrea.

In December 1951, after his return to Asmara together with his family, he was promptly employed in the customs office in Asmara. When the Federation came into being, in September 1952, the customs office was placed under Ethiopian jurisdiction and Grazmatch Ligiam continued working in the same department. In 1954 he was transferred to the customs of the Massawa Port Office as a Finance Officer. Later on he became the head of Finance and Administration unit in the customs office at Asmara airport.



grazmatch Ligiam at the Asmara Customs Office in the 1950's

In addition to his duties as a government official, he was a part time teacher in Comboni Girls School from September 1955 to June 1956.

In July 1956, the Ethiopian authorities decided to open a section in the *Ende-Rasie* office (Crown Representative's Office) that would cater to the needs of and handled the affairs of the Tigre speaking population. Grazmatch Ligiam was appointed to the post due to his qualification and an outstanding command of the Tigre and Amharic languages and he began running this office with the rank of department head. It was through him that the leaders and influential individuals of the Tigre people were given audience mostly with the *Ende-Rasie* and occasionally with the Emperor himself in which their grievances were heard and their problems attended to. During this period Grazmatch Ligiam made several trips with successive *Ende-Rassies* to several places in the low lands where the Tigre speaking people inhabit. Despite his immense effort to assist with the affairs of the Tigre people, very minimal action was taken by the Ethiopian government to solve the problems that existed at that time.



Representatives of the Tigre people meeting with Ende-Rasie Let. General Abey Abebe and Deputy Ened-Rasie Dejazmatch Asfeha Weldemichael in Asmara in 1959 - Grazmatch Ligiam was the facilitator



Emperor Haile Selassie meeting with the people of Agoardat in 1963 (Grazmatch Ligiam Ishaq is the one making a speech)

In November 1962 after the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, Eritrea's federal status was abolished and it became an ordinary province under the Empire. The *Ende-Rasie* office was then converted to Teklai-Gezat (General Governorate Office). The Ethiopian feudal authorities took full control of the Eritrean Administrative offices. Luul Ras Asrate Kassa was designated as the new governor and he moved his office from the palace to Teklaigzat (the old commando truppe) after constructing new buildings. Soon after, Asrate Kassa appointed Grazmatch Ligiam as a deputy director in the administration department at the office of the governor. While in this office, Grazmatch Ligiam has also continued to retain the responsibility of the affairs of the Tigre people.

In the mid 1960s the Eritrean armed struggle for independence led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was becoming stronger and started gaining victories. Alarmed by this turn of events, the Ethiopian leaders chose to send their armed forces to burn, loot villages and massacre civilians indiscriminately. Therefore, many leaders and elders of the Tigre speaking people mainly from the low lands were desperately trying to file their complaints and grievances at the General Governorate Office. Since Grazmatch Ligiam's office was responsible in handling such matters, he became instrumental in arranging meetings of the Tigre people with the governor where they were able to speak and present their petitions in person but unfortunately without any considerable result.

Although he was an official within the Ethiopian regime he was simultaneously a clandestine member of the 2nd Zone (*Kalaay Kifli*) of Omer Ezaz in the ELF³ as early as 1965. Moreover, he was paying his membership fees as well as assisting in granting parole to political detainees and divulging information on the frequent tour and visits by Assarte Kassa and other high officials to the lowland regions and providing other pertinent information required by ELF.



Meeting with the leaders and elders of the Tigre people in Massawa in 1964 (Standing in the center from left to right Fitawrari Michael Hasama, Leuel Asrate Kasa and Grazmatch Ligiam Ishaq)

In February 1966, he was transferred to the Ministry of Finance and became the director of the Budget Department until 1971. Since Grazmatch Ligiam was reputed for his ability to manage and direct assignments and above all his mastery of several languages, he was entrusted to establish the first Asmara based radio broadcasting in Tigrinya and Tigre. His assignment was temporary and conditional. He was to retain his main post, while recruiting and training capable replacements in the new assignment and return as soon as the radio program stood on its own feet. This was a deal he struck with the Ethiopian Ministry of Information and the Eritrean General Governorate office.

After visiting the Ministry of Information and the Addis Ababa radio station for consultation, discussion and briefing he started this special project in August 1968.

³ 2nd Zone was representing the people in the Sahel, Mensa, Maria, Billen, Betjuk, etc. areas.

Initially, he did almost everything by himself. He was the director, producer and anchor especially for the Tigre desk. The Asmara radio was a great achievement at that time because it was the first radio program, which enabled Eritreans to follow the news, listen to current affairs, interviews, music, sports and other diverse programs in their own languages. Before that the only available radio broadcasting was from Addis Ababa and was aired in Amharic, which most Eritreans hardly understood.

The Asmara radio program became very popular and for the first time Eritreans started enjoying listening to songs from legendary Eritrean singers from Maheber Theater Asmara (MaTA) such as Atewabrhan Seghid, Tewelde Redda, Alamin Abdeletif, Tiberih Tesfahuney, Osman Abulrahim and many others. There were many patriotic songs, just to mention some, Adeye Adi jeganu beAl men'yom zTelemu? (Atewabrhan Seghid) Shigey Habuni (Tewelde Redda), Eti Gezana Abi Hedemo (Tiberih); which contributed for the development of national feelings among the youth. It is also worth remembering that the opening song of the Asmara radio program aired by Grazmatch Ligiam was Bahta Gebrihiwot's popular song entitled 'Sekai Yekal Eyu' meaning 'hardship can be tolerated'. It is a love song with a dual meaning. He chose the song in order to convey a message of encouragement to the people, saying that we have to endure hardship now in order to eventually win our freedom.

A large number of his audience particularly the Tigre program listeners remember him admiringly to this day for his original and refined use of the Tigre language. After independence, he was frequently consulted by the Tigre and Tigrinya radio program staff for constructive advice and suggestions, and he was always willing to share his expertise.

In May 1969, he left the radio project and returned to the 'Teklai Gizat' at his main post as a director in the budget department and in 1971 he became director of Municipalities Affairs. Grazmatch Ligiam retired in August 1974 one month before the 'Derg' took over replacing the monarchy. During the time of his service with the Ethiopian government he had received two gold medals for his hard work and accomplishments.

Besides being a devoted civil servant, an educator and a media person; Grazmatch Ligiam was an avid reader, book collector and gifted writer. The fact that he was proficient in writing and speaking fluently in the Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Italian, English and Latin languages helped him a lot not only to write and translate books but also to write them in diverse languages.

His first book titled 'Yemonto Kristo Kawnt' was a translation from the English and Italian versions of Alexandre Dumas's classic 'The Count of Monte Cristo' into Amharic. The book was published in March 1966, and became popular among the Amharic speakers and students. At one point in the early 70s, some high school students in Asmara asked

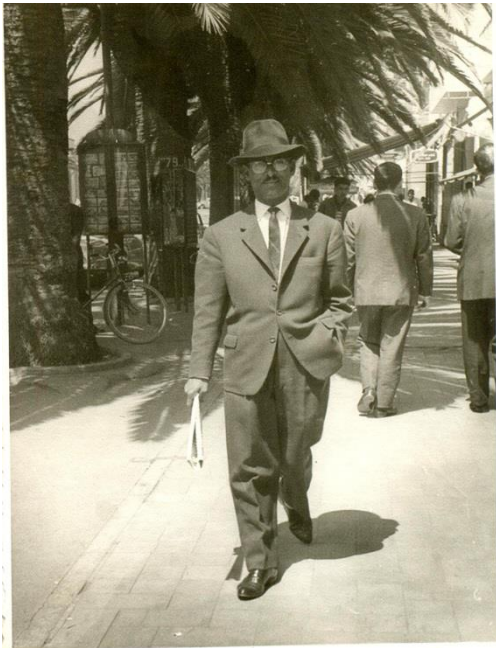
Grazmatch Ligiam's permission to convert his book into a play, which later became popular among the drama & theater audience.

His second book was an original inventive murder mystery written in Tigrinya and published in 1971 by the title of "Zaywalkeuo Kitlet" that can be translated as 'Murder that I did not commit'. In this Tigrinya fiction, Grazmatch Ligiam also managed to coherently put the reality and events that were taking place in the daily life of the Eritreans at that time.

Among the unpublished works of the author are the following:

- His work titled 'Men Kon Eyu Ketalien' can be translated as 'who murdered the ladies' was yet another murder mystery novel which tells a story about a crime and the work of the police to find the killer.
- Due to his interest in history and social studies he researched and wrote in Tigrinya the history of Eritrea titled 'Hasir Tarik Eritrea' covering the period before the Italian colonialism up to 1991.
- 'Ms Makina N'falet' meaning 'let's familiarize ourselves with the car industry' written in Tigrigna. The book explains the main parts of a car and how the system functions.
- The 'Tigre-Tigrigna - English Dictionary' (though not completed).

Grazmatch Ligiam left the unpublished works to his children and grandchildren hoping that one day they will update and publish them.



Grazmatch Ligiam in downtown (Campo-Citato) Asmara in 1969

In addition, he has contributed in the writings and literature of Tigre and Tigrinya by writing short stories and articles in Gazetta Hadas Eritrea.

In the earlier years of his career, Grazmatch Ligiam was also undertaking a consultancy work in teaching and tutoring academicians, historians and PhD students from Europe who came over to Eritrea in order to study the Tigre Language and to learn the history of the Tigre people. Grazmatch Ligiam had the pleasure of tutoring and teaching the Tigre language and culture to Frank Robert Palmer, a British linguist and scholar. Professor Palmer managed to write a book titled 'The Morphology of Tigre Noun'. The book was published in 1962 and was widely distributed in the UK and continental Europe. Professor Palmer was a linguistic researcher and lecturer in the department of the African language studies at Oxford University, England; he is now a retired professor living in the UK.

Grazmatch Ligiam and his wife Weizero Ellen spent 55 years of a wonderful marriage life. Together they produced ten children, five daughters and five sons. As a family man, he was loving, caring, loyal and a devoted father. Both of them were very much keen and dedicated especially to the education of their children. They sacrificed a lot in raising ten children and invested a significant amount of time, money and knowledge to make sure their children acquire the highest level of education and succeed in life. He has also nurtured nationalistic feelings in his children, which motivated some to join the armed struggle and the rest contribute to the overall movement for independence.

Grazmatch Ligiam, after his retirement, spent much of his time writing, participating in community led activities and attending to matters that had to do with families and friends. He died in January 1994 peacefully after a short illness and was buried in Asmara Tsaserat Catholic Cemetery.

There is a saying in Tigrinya, "Name leads like the candle that gives light". Ligiam is a unique Tigre name which is equivalent to the word L'guam in Tigrinya and to the word Bridle in English. The name was an appropriate choice as he lived up to his name's meaning, always leading people around him to the right direction which made him a good example of success to his family in particular and to the community in general.