

Mahmoud Kanone

"The improvement in education was a bright spot in Keren"

Interviewed by Suleiman Bekit

"Wise teachers create an environment that encourages students to teach themselves"

Leonard Roy Frank



Mahmoud Mohamed Ali (Kanone) who inspired many of students with his passion for learning, was one of the pioneers of education in Eritrea. He had implemented the genius and the efficiency of educational management. He was one of the teachers who wanted to scale the mountain of greatness, needed to develop a desire for teaching excellence, and was passionate about helping others learn. He committed and dedicated to his chosen field. A great educator who got his joys out of hearing how the students he taught had succeeded in life.

I met Mr. Mahmoud in Abu Dhabi and I had the following dialogue with him.

Suleiman: Can you tell us the place of birth, your childhood and your youth?

Kanone: I was born in 1930 in Hagat; I spent the first years of my childhood between Hagat and Keren. At the age of seven, I went to Agordat and attended a primary school. After a year and a half, I left to Asmara, where I was among the first students who registered to Asmara Islamic school at its founding. In 1946 I moved to a boarding school at "Beit Gergis." In 1948 the British Administration decided to give Muslims in the western district their own middle school in the city of Keren, and therefore I moved to Keren to study the intermediate stage. Before the start in this school, we had to clean up those old buildings that were originally used as stables for the Italian Army, and the

buildings were in need of maintenance. The students of this school were from all regions and towns of Eritrea.

Suleiman: which was the prevailing teaching language? How was the educational curriculum? And how do you evaluate the standard at that time in general?

Kanone: The teaching was in Arabic language. I think the standard was very high. The curriculum was British, therefore, English language was dominant and strong, as many teachers were from Britain, and of course the British are known as good teachers, especially in the educational field. In addition, there was a library in that school which contains hundreds of encyclopedias and specialized books in English and Arabic. This allowed us to read as many books as possible. Unpretentiously, I was able to read all those books which existed in the library.

Suleiman: After Keren junior high school, where had you headed?

Kanone: In late 1949, I participate in an admission examination to teachers school (TTI) in Asmara. 17 students from the same school have succeeded in this test. Among those were the late Dr. Josef Nabari and Mr Abdullah Saleh. And thus, I went to Asmara. At that time TTI was one of the best educational institutions, since the focus was on teaching natural sciences and mathematics in particular.

Suleiman: Following your graduation from TTI, where and what was your first job?

Kanone: After my graduation, the education authorities send me to Ginda School. I worked there for one year as a teacher, and then as an assistant headmaster. The following year, I became the headmaster for that school. A while later, I moved to Agordat, and worked as a headmaster. After that I transferred to Keren. I became a headmaster as well as a member of the Matriculations Commission. At that time two secondary schools were opened in Asmara which were called Haile Silase, and Leul Mekonnen.

Suleiman: How did you manage to continue your higher education? How could you leave teaching easily? It was a prominent post at that time.

Kanone: Yes, but if I did not have the opportunity to attend the American University of Beirut, perhaps I could have continued in the same post. What had happened was that I was able to pass the admission examination to that university, and the purpose behind this was to obtain a diploma. The period of this study was two years, so I traveled to Beirut and I enrolled to the American University. There in Beirut, there were several other Eritrean students; among them were Yousf Nabarai and Omar Musa Haj. In 1960 I returned to Eritrea in a short-term leave. During that time, a military coup



against Haile Selase took place led by Colonel Mengistu Nawai. That confused the situation in Eritrea, where Eritrea was associated in a Federation with Ethiopia.

In the meantime, there were dozens of Eritrean flags hoist on the streets. Because of that the authorities committed indiscriminate arrests among the citizens. Among the arrested men was my neighbor, who he was arrested holding some Eritrean flags, and this led him being accused of possession and dissemination of forbidden material. Since I was present in that place during his arrest, I was summoned as witness in court. I witnessed at that Court by saying that the man was a drunkard, and when he was drunk, he held often his turban under his arms, and what I saw was not flags but turban. Thus the man was rescued. Because of this trial I was not able to travel to continue my study. Besides that, the authority began to harass me by putting obstacles to prevent me from traveling. This forced me to stay in Agordat for a while, and thus losing the whole semester. But I was determined not to surrender. Thanks to Allah, after one year finally I was able to travel and attend my university.



Suleiman: What kind of a certificate granted to you from the American University of Beirut?

Kanone: As I said we went to Beirut in order to obtain a diploma in education, but they let me continue my study for a Bachelor degree in education. The reason for this is due to my high points in the final certificate. And thus thank God, I got my BA degree.

Sat / 7: After your return home, which tasks entrusted to you?

Following my return to Eritrea, the education authority ordered me to work as a teacher in **Yerga Alem** high school in Addis Ababa-Ethiopia. Despite the fact that this school was considered among the best schools in Ethiopia at that time, besides the attractive salary, which was about 450's Bir, I refused to work there. I have one thing to mention here that the dialogue between me and the Director of the Ethiopian education was going in English. As I said in spite of all temptations, I preferred to work in Eritrea with low salary about 300 Bir. Later on I started working in Keren Secondary school as headmaster. Here I would like to pay a tribute to a pioneer teacher, Mr. Mohamed Adam, who was the headmaster of keren high School before me.

Suleiman: It is well known that keren high school was in the heart of the events which prevailed in the sixties and seventies. How did those political and security conditions affected the education in general and the students in particular.

Kanone: Of course the school was affected by the situation that prevailed. The school was the only institution which brings together young people, particularly from the western regions. Thus we have lost dozens of promising students in the War of Independence, mainly after the massacre

of Owna, which shook the entire nation, many of our students have joined the freedom fighters. Meanwhile, we struggled to convert the school to make it fully comprehensive school, with several sections which teaches different skills to benefit our children. It was not easy. However after so many efforts the stakeholders agreed to convert the school to what we want, and they send the equipment to do so.

I was also keen on to have a high qualified Staff, and that's why all teaches at Keren high school demonstrated a great professionalism in their fields. This improvement in education was a bright spot in a city whose future hanged in the balance. That 's why the school achieved a positive outcome. In fact dozens of students were able to pass the general high school examination, and got access to the University of Addis Ababa, which were insurmountable. By the way, Amharic language was a big obstacle; otherwise a lot of our students could have been succeeded in that examination.

Anyhow in comparison with other schools whether in Eritrea or Ethiopia, Keren High School students have proved the overall competence in all areas, in spite of all the pressure which was against the school by the Ethiopians authorities.

Suleiman: "sweetkeren" is a keren high school reunion website, it`s a web platform and intended to act as a meeting point for those who studied in keren. Did you know that?

Kanone: Yes, I know. This is an outstanding work. In fact, they invited me to participate in their first reunion in Toronto last year, but unfortunately I was not able to attend due to health problems, but I am longing to meet my colleagues and my students.

According to what is advertised on the site, the next meeting will be next year in Washington, and if God willing, I will be present at this reunion.

Suleiman: Are there any last words?

Kanone: I say thank God for everything. I came to Abu Dhabi in order to visit my sons who are working here, and as you know, I currently live in California in the United States with my family, but I feel comfortable only in Keren. My health is no longer as it was; nowadays I use several drugs on a daily basis, and this is the only obstacle between me and Keren. So I am staying abroad for the purpose of treatment.

Suleiman Bekit

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