

THE JACK KRAMER PAPERS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY

Issayas Tesfamariam

PART THREE

Issayas: Would you tell our readers about yourself.

Mr. Kramer: I've worked as a reporter for the Wall Street Journal (two years), as Business Week Magazine's Cairo-based Middle East Bureau Chief (three years) and as a Staff Editor at Time Magazine (three years.) I've also worked as a freelance producer for the Public Broadcasting Service, During the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-sixties; I was Birmingham Alabama bureau chief for the Southern Courier, a movement newspaper associated with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In addition to the above outfits, I've written for the Nation, the New Republic, the New York Review of Books and New Society, and a British periodical.

As a reporter I've covered banking and oil, most particularly the oil crisis, which took me from Texas to Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Geneva, London, Vienna, and Rome. I was accredited three times as a reporter in Vietnam (1967, 1968, and 1969), and covered major battles at Cam Lo, Con Thien, Gio Linh and Khe Sanh. I covered the Six Days War in Israel, the war in Eritrea, the war in the Western Sahara, the revolution in Iran (from Teheran, Ahwaz and Abadan), the civil war in Lebanon (I was there when the French and US barracks were bombed and helped restart Beirut's English-language Daily Star, and in 1994 I covered both the French Foreign Legion and the US Marine Corps during the Somali troubles. In addition to the high spots, I've traveled extensively through East Africa, including, of course, Rwanda, about which I'm now co-writing a book, King Solomon's Crimes. I've also written a book about the 'sixties, Travels with the Celestial Dog, which was published by a London subsidiary of Random House, Wildwood House, and which contains extensive material on Vietnam and Eritrea.

I'm a veteran of the Marine Corps, and a graduate of Stanford and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

Issayas: You were one of the first Western journalists who reported on Eritrea. How did you get interested in Eritrea at that time (1968)?

Mr. Kramer: I wish I could say it was my perspicacity that got me interested in Eritrea. In fact I was quite young and like most Americans, I barely knew Eritrea existed. My only reporting jobs had been for the civil rights paper, the Southern Courier, and for a provincial newspaper in Britain. The previous summer I'd made a friendly bet with a student reading law at Cambridge, Malcolm Ashton, that come the summer of '68 I'd make it to Addis overland before he did. I got my Egyptian and Sudanese visas; in London, the Ethiopians told me that I didn't need one. I traveled by third class railway coach to Port Sudan, where I tried to book passage on a Greek freighter and the Greeks told me all about Eritrea, and how you really couldn't go there because of the war. So I got back on the train to Kassala, where I slept on the floor of the police post, and was told all about a fellow who shared the same room with us (only about half of us were inmates). He had a huge head, and they said he was in jail "for throwing bombs at the Eritreans" i.e., Eritrean activists living

in Kassala. Of course I was interested, but still more interested in getting to Addis overland, and was having no luck with the Ethiopian consul in Kassala, who kept putting me off. Eventually I ran into the Indian fellow who ran a radio shop. Eventually he put me in touch with a Sudanese fellow called Hassan mi Jack who had a small shop from which he rented and repaired everything from bicycles to refrigerators. I remember he had a couple small posters on the wall, one of Mao as a young scholar in Kiang Si, and another of a female Chinese guerrilla about to pitch a grenade. For a small businessman, he was quite a character. I remember he said, "My name is Hassan mi Jack. They call me Jack Palace. The Man without a Gun. Only I have a gun." And with that he pulled out a .38 revolver. We talked for some time, and he suggested that come sundown, I get a table at Kassala's Central Gardens, order tea and wait. I did.

Issayas: Can you tell me more about the guy who was in jail "for throwing bombs at Eritrean activists"? Who was he? Who was he working for? Etc.

Mr. Kramer: No. I had the impression he was mentally disturbed, and in any case, just hireling. Regardless, at that moment I was not working as a reporter.

Issayas: You met Kidane Kiflu in Kassala and then he convinced you to go to Eritrea. Would you describe Kidane Kiflu?

Mr. Kramer: I didn't have to wait long for Kidane to show up with some friends. We talked a while. He asked if I had any of my articles with me. I showed them to him. It was hard not to be impressed by his earnest and straightforward manner. He was altogether unaffected, wearing a white shirt that was clean and pressed, and black trousers. I don't think that at that point he offered to take me into Eritrea. I was impressed, and you can tell from my C.V. that I've covered some trouble spots, but I don't go looking randomly for trouble and jump at the chance to cover it whenever it comes up. At that point, I would have been happier getting a visa and a bus to Addis. We met again, and eventually he asked me if I'd like to go over the border into occupied Eritrea with ELF guerrillas, meet some locals and come back to Kassala. I said thanks but no thanks. But then the Ethiopians gave me a firm and final No, and so I asked him if the ELF could take me all the way across Eritrea to Asmara. He didn't say yes right away. It took awhile; I went to see him where he worked as a tailor, and met some other activists. Eventually I got the go-ahead and six of us left Kassala in an old Peugeot taxi that almost immediately left the road and took off straight out over the desert. The five were myself, two cadres (Abdullah Hassan and Aberra Mekonnen) and three guerrilla scouts, Ismail, Ibrahim and Ali. As I remember, it took almost three days just to reach the border. It was hard just to get a camel.

Issayas: How long were you in Eritrea? And would you describe your stay with the fighters?

Mr. Kramer: My account at Hoover should say how long I was in Eritrea. As I remember it was just over a month, more than three weeks of which were spent with the ELF.

Issayas: In the "Kramer Collection" at the Hoover Institution Archives there is a transcript of the audio tapes you made in Eritrea in 1968. In it you mentioned that you met the guerrillas (fighters) through an Indian contact in Kassala. What does contact mean? Who was this Indian and what was his connection with the ELF, if any?

Mr. Kramer: I can't remember any more than what I've written above. As I remember, I just ran into the fellow. It wasn't unusual. Reporters are curious. And in a backwater like Kassala in 1968, everybody is interested in an outsider. It was easy to talk to people; sometimes too easy.

Issayas: I am going to start backwards and ask you, where and when did you learn about the murder of Kidane Kiflu? And what was your reaction?

Mr. Kramer: I learned of Kidane's death years later reading propaganda that the EPLF sent me. I'm usually pretty cynical reading any sort of propaganda, but reading about Kidane's death and how he died ambushed me. It was partly because of how he impressed me, and that he'd trusted me, but I wasn't in Kassala that long and he didn't come with us. So I think one reason it hit me so hard was that he represented what I saw in Eritrea. There are six ghosts who follow me wherever I go. My father, Kidane, my old drill instructor at Parris Island (his name was Jettie Rivers and he won a posthumous Silver Star while I was in Vietnam) and three old geezers who kept me writing (an American, Malcolm Cowley, and two Brits, James Cameron and Oliver Caldecott).

Issayas: You mentioned that one of the ghosts that follow you around wherever you go is Kidane's. My long search to locate you partly was that my suspicion had always been that you were turned off (after the brutal murder of Kidane) from reporting about Eritrea. Was my suspicion well founded?

Mr. Kramer: I didn't make myself clear. I was briefly turned off by reading about in-fighting. I thought to myself, that's all these guys need, with all their troubles. Fighting among themselves. Of course I read the propaganda, but it didn't convince me. Soon enough, though, I began to understand, and was once again interested in Eritrea. If anything turned me off writing about Eritrea, it was the great wall of indifference I met when I tried to convince quality publications that Eritrea was worth writing about. I told them basically that we were fighting a guerrilla war in Vietnam, that Vietnam was heavily covered, and meantime, we had hardly any coverage from independent (i.e., non-ideological) reporters of what it was like on the other side of a guerrilla war, the Liberation Front side. They were more interested in my Vietnam reporting. In fact, it was easier to convince them to hire me to write and report for them on staff than it was to get them to accept one freelance article about an African country.

Aidan Hartley, who has just published a book called *The Zanzibar Chest* about Rwanda, sums up what it's like. He recalls hearing from his Reuters boss in the middle of the Rwanda genocide, which was still barely reported (the horror wasn't widely known until after the war). "Sorry, mate," his boss said. "We're not going to be able to use any more Rwanda material from you." Hartley asked why not. The answer: "It's not making any money for us." In other words, papers that subscribed to Reuters weren't buying anything.

Another example, which has shades of the current scandal dogging the NY Times,: After I left the guerrillas and got to Asmara, I ran into Times reporter Eric Pace, who took my photos of the guerrillas, took my story, said it should be in the Times, and promised to send it in. He sure did. When Eritrea's Liberation Front let a Marine Corps veteran, credentialed as a reporter in Vietnam, accompany them, they were in effect handing a fat goat to whatever news outfit got the material. What the reading public got was tripe you'd never call fit-fit. What appeared in the paper (under the byline of their reporter) was a thoroughly gutted version of what I provided, without a hint that an ideologically independent US reporter had been with the guerrillas. (Years later, this same Times reporter published a political novel about Iran that appeared either just before or after the revolution; in it, the word "ayatollah" never once appears.) This is a lot worse for Eritrea and for Africa than it is for the small clutch of reporters like me. We take chances, including professional ones; we expect to take our lumps. For Africa, it means grotesque reporting.

Aidan Hartley notes how much news (Liberia, for example) comes out of Africa during August. Why? August, he points out, is "the silly season", when "real people" are on vacation and editors

are hard up for what they consider news, so they run stuff from Africa that they've been ignoring all year. I'd add another reason: When an outfit sends a reporter to Africa, it likes to show off. That's why you'll see big stories running about Africa long after the news to which the story is pegged. That's because the news really isn't pegged to the news, which was ignored when it happened. It's pegged to their reporter's tour. Reporters for big American outfits like to laugh at the way African news programs always start out with the president's schedule, even if he's just meeting with the Ministry of Female Sport, while elsewhere in the world, the Berlin Wall is falling. The way rich, sophisticated US news operations report Africa, with "news" neatly corresponding with the month of August or their reporters' tours, is just as absurd.

Hartley praises local African reporters in Rwanda (and I can confirm that many, all Bahutu, did great work exposing the genocédaire persecuting Batutsi), then laments how their work was often either ignored or stolen by outfits who were paying big bucks to have their own reporters on station. He calls it "the big foot from the big hacks." Halhal is an example. Years after I left Eritrea, western reporters began to travel somewhat regularly with the guerrillas, thanks to EPLF work, the availability of vehicles to carry reporters, and greater security. During this period, I ran into Times reporter John Darnton in Nairobi who had my wife and I over for supper. John, who is a good reporter, had recently spent almost as much time with the guerrillas as I had. Though it was now a much more common story, and the Eritreans were much less "the other side" (the Stalinist Mengistu having taken over Addis), the Times ran his story in three parts, with each part starting on the front page. Needless to say, there was no Halhal to which to peg all this. Which makes the Nation, and several British periodicals that published my reports out of Eritrea, look pretty good. It was also a British outfit (started by two successful editors at Penguin, Ollie Caldecott and Dieter Pevsner) who published my book on the sixties, *Travels with the Celestial Dog*, which includes a long chapter on Eritrea. Likewise, Hoover showed prescience. Given their conservative reputation, I was cautious, but a) I wasn't disclosing anything the Eritreans had not disclosed openly to me, b) Peter Duignan assured me my account would be unedited and open to anyone and c) I was guided above all by Kidane's obvious concern just to get the story out, available not just to reporters but to researchers and writers. Hoover lived up to its commitment not to edit me, and to make the collection available in the open stacks. In general, it showed more foresight than news outfits in recognizing the substance of the Eritrean movement, Marxist or not. (Though I must say I was somewhat baffled by their lack of interest in Rwanda, which seems to me of equal interest.)

By the way, I've been getting complaints from one of the ghosts who hike around the world with me. When I mentioned them to you, I neglected to mention Ollie Caldecott. He was, is (even in death), inspirational.

Issayas: You also mentioned that you learned about Kidane's death from reading EPLF's material that they sent you. How did they contact you especially since there was no EPLF at that time?

Mr. Kramer: After the ELF/EPLF split, virtually all the correspondence I got was EPLF; in short, they continued the correspondence that Kidane began.

Issayas: The ideas that Kidane expressed in his letters to you, did he ever express to you verbally the same ideas before in Kassala?

Mr. Kramer: It is too easy for me to read those ideas into what Kidane talked about in Kassala. Maybe they were there, but he was more guarded.



Picture courtesy of Mr. Jack Kramer. (Kassala, Sudan .1968)

Kidane Kiflu (second from the left back row), Aberra Mekonnen (second from the right front row). Jack Kramer (second from the left sitting).

Issayas: Were you suspicious from reading his letters to you that he was a threat to the status-quo of the ELF or was he in danger at that time?

Mr. Kramer: I was not suspicious that he was a threat when I read his letters to me, but I was nonetheless naïve. I was still young. I admired the movement. I was not critical enough. So when I got his letters, I thought to myself, “Don’t you guys have it hard enough without fighting with each other.” My basic reaction was disappointment. Which I must admit is a silly reaction for a reporter, but that’s how it was.

Next, Part Four. Kidane’s childhood, education and nationalism. Interview with Minister Naizghi Kiflu and Professor Berhe Habte-giorgis.
