

Culture of Eritrea

Development of Eritrea's Identity



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Orientation

Identification. The term "eritrea" derives from Sinus Erythraeus, the name Greek traders of the third century B.C.E. gave to the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and the Africa continent (now known as the Red Sea). Later, during the Roman Empire, the Romans called it Mare Erythraeum, literary meaning "the red sea." When Italy colonized a strip of land along the Red Sea in 1890, they gave it the name Eritrea.

Since the creation of Eritrea was so closely linked to Ethiopia, Eritrea's identity developed in struggles against its ancient and larger neighbor to the south. Many of the nine ethnic groups within Eritrea are also found in Ethiopia, and the dominant Christian Orthodox highland culture of Ethiopia also stretches into the Eritrean highland plateau. Historically, there has been a division in Eritrea between the Christian highlands, which are culturally and linguistically homogenous, and the predominantly Muslim lowlands, which are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous. Eritrea's long war of liberation, however, managed to bridge some of the traditional differences between the highland and lowland populations.

Location and Geography. Located in northeastern Africa, Eritrea has about 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) of coastline along the west coast of the Red Sea. To the north and northwest, the country borders the Sudan, to the south, Ethiopia, and to the southwest, Djibouti. Eritrean territory covers about 48,000 square miles (125,000 square kilometers) and contains a wide variety of rugged landscapes: mountains, desert, highland plateau, lowland plains, and off the coast some 150 coral islands. The topographical variety has affected the social organization and mode of production of the country's nine ethnic groups. In the highland plateau, people live in small villages conducting subsistence plow-agriculture. Many of the lowland groups, however, lead semi-nomadic pastoral or agro pastoral lives. The Eritrean capital, Asmara, is located in the highland plateau, the home region of the biggest ethnic group, the Tigrinya.

Demography. The population in Eritrea is approximately three to three-and-a-half million (1994), divided between nine ethnic groups. The highland Tigrinya group constitutes about half of the population. More than 75 percent of the population lives in rural areas.

Linguistic Affiliation. Although the Eritrean Constitution states that all nine ethnic languages in the country are equal, the government of Eritrea has two administrative languages: Tigrinya and Arabic. Tigrinya is a Semitic language also spoken by the Tigreans of Ethiopia. Arabic was chosen to represent the lowland Muslim groups in the country. Nevertheless, only one ethnic group, the Rashaida, has Arabic as a mother tongue, whereas the other groups use it as a religious language. Many of the groups are bilingual, and because of the legacy of Ethiopian domination over Eritrea, many Eritreans also speak Amharic, the Ethiopian administrative language. Eritrean pupils are today taught in their mother tongue in primary levels (one through five), and English takes over to be the language of instruction from sixth grade (at least in theory). English is taught as a second language from second grade. It appears, however, that Tigrinya is taking over as the dominant language, since the majority of the population are Tigrinya-speakers, the biggest towns are located in the highlands, and most people in government and the state bureaucracy are from the Tigrinya ethnic group.

Symbolism. Since Eritreans fought a thirty-year-long war of liberation (1961–1991) to achieve independence from Ethiopian domination, the national culture endorsed by the government invokes symbols of war and sacrifice. The three main national holidays all commemorate the war of liberation: 24 May, Liberation Day; 20 June, Martyr's Day; and 1 September, a holiday that commemorates the start of the liberation war. The official Eritrean flag, adopted in 1993, is a combination of the flag of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the liberation movement that achieved a military victory over the Ethiopian government, and the old flag given to Eritrea by United Nations in 1952.



Cathedral of Asmara (Oct 2000)

History and Ethnic Relations

Emergence of the Nation. The Eritrean-Ethiopian region has been exposed to population movements and migrations from northern Africa, across the Red Sea, and from the south. On the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, one also finds traces of some of Africa's oldest civilizations. The Axumite empire, which emerges into the light of history in the first century C.E. , comprised the Akkele-Guzai region of highland Eritrea and the Agame region of Tigray, Ethiopia. The empire expanded and its port city of Adulis, south of present-day Massawa, became an important trading post hosting ships from Egypt, Greece, the Arab world, and other far-off areas. In the early fourth century Enzana, the king of Axum, converted to Christianity. He thus established Christianity as the religion of the court and state, making the Ethiopian/Eritrean Christian Church one of the oldest in the world. The decline of the Axumite empire began around 800, when its area of dominance became too big to administer efficiently. Moreover, local resistance and uprisings coupled with the domination of overseas trade by the Islamic empire in the Middle East led to the collapse of the kingdom. Ethiopia was subsequently constructed on the legacy of Axum.

The Italian colonization of Eritrea in 1890 marked the first time that Eritrean territory was ruled as a single entity. Under Italian colonial administration, infrastructure was developed, and a modern administrative state structure was established. The development of the Eritrean colonial state helped to create a distinction between Eritreans as subjects of the Italian crown and their ethnic brothers in Ethiopia. The notion that Eritrea was more developed and modern than Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia helped to boost Eritrean national consciousness.

Italy—which had occupied Ethiopia in 1935— saw its dream of an East African empire crushed in World War II. British forces liberated Ethiopia from the Italian colonizers and took control of Eritrea in 1941. Eritrea was administered by the British Military Administration until 1952, when the United Nations (UN) federated Eritrea with Ethiopia. Ethiopia soon violated the federal arrangement, however, and in 1962 Ethiopia annexed Eritrea as its fourteenth province. The year before the annexation, the Eritrean armed resistance against Ethiopian rule commenced. It would take thirty years of liberation war before the Eritrean People's Liberation Front managed to oust Ethiopian forces from Eritrean soil, one of the longest wars of liberation in Africa. In 1993 the Eritrean people voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence in a UN-monitored referendum.

National Identity. Eritrea's long struggle for self-determination and independence has created a feeling of nationhood based on a common destiny. The armed struggle was initiated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961, but in 1970 an ELF splinter group formed a new organization that later took the name Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). During periods of the 1970s, a fierce civil war raged between the ELF and the EPLF. In 1981, the EPLF, with the help of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia, managed to crush the ELF as a military organization. From then on, the EPLF deliberately used its military struggle and its internal policy of social revolution—which included land reform, gender consciousness, and class equality—to achieve a national cohesion. The EPLF recruited fighters from all the country's ethnic groups. The fighters and the civilian population in the liberated areas were educated in Eritrean history and the EPLF ideology of a strong territorial nationalism.

Following the vote for independence in 1993, the EPLF took power in Asmara and continued their centrally-driven nationalistic policies. For instance, eighteen months of national service became compulsory for all men and women between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five. Moreover, new multiethnic regions (zoba) were established in 1997, abolishing the old ethnicity-based regions (awraja). The strongest force of Eritrean nationalism after independence derives from the border wars Eritrea fought against Yemen, Djibouti, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The conflict with Ethiopia, which erupted in 1998, escalated into a full-scale war that claimed tens of thousands of casualties. During this war, the majority of the able-bodied population of Eritrea had to serve in the national military forces. A peace treaty with Ethiopia was negotiated by the U.N. and Organization of African Unity (OAU) and signed 12 December 2000.

At the turn of the millennium, mounting criticism and resistance, most notably from lowland groups and intellectuals, against the monopolistic role of EPLF was coming to the fore and splitting the unitary, nationalistic impression of an all-embracing Eritrean identity. Much of the criticism reflected the view that the EPLF was a monopolistic, Tigrinya-dominated front that was subduing the interests and cultures of the minority groups.

Ethnic Relations. The highland Tigrinya ethnic group is the dominant group, numerically, politically, and economically. There is also a minority group of Tigrinya-speaking Muslims called Jeberti in the highlands. The Jeberti, however, are not recognized as a separate ethnic group by the Eritrean government. The lowland groups—the Afar, Beja/Hadarab, Bileyn, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, and Tigre—are all, with the exception of the Tigre, relatively small and, taken together, they do not form any homogenous cultural or political blocs. Traditionally, the relationship between the highland and lowland groups has been one of tension and conflict. Raids on livestock and encroachment on land and grazing rights have led to mutual distrust, which is still, to a certain degree, relevant in the relation between the minorities and the state. Many of the groups are also divided between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti, making cross-border ethnic alliances a possible threat to the national identity.



Asmara City (Oct 2000)

Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space

The architecture of Eritrean towns reflects the nation's colonial past and the shifting influence of foreign powers. The Italian population in the country called Asmara "Little Rome." The city boasts wide avenues, cafés and pastries, and a host of Italian restaurants. The port of Massawa, on the other hand, is influenced by the Ottoman period, the Egyptian presence, and the long tradition of trade with far-off countries and ports. In the countryside, traditional building customs are still upheld. In the highlands, small stone houses (hidmo) with roofs made of branches and rocks dominate. The house is separated into two areas, a kitchen section in the back and a public room in the front that is also used as sleeping quarters. The various lowland groups employ several housing styles, from tentlike structures (agnet) among the pastoral nomadic groups, to more permanent straw or stone/mud huts among the sedentary groups.

Food and Economy

Food in Daily Life. Eritrean cuisine is a reflection of the country's history. The injerra is commonly eaten in the rural areas. It is a pancake-like bread that is eaten together with a sauce called tsebhi or wat . The sauce may be of a hot and spicy meat variety, or vegetable based. In the urban centers one finds the strong influence of Italian cuisine, and pasta is served in all restaurants. The lowland groups have a different food tradition than the highlands with the staple food being a porridge (asida in Arabic) made of sorghum.

Food Customs at Ceremonial Occasions. Both Islam and the Orthodox Christian tradition require rigorous observance of fasts and food taboos. Several periods of fasting, the longest being Lent among the Orthodox and Ramadan among Muslims, have to be adhered to by all adults. During religious celebrations, however, food and beverages are served in plenty. Usually an ox, sheep, or goat is slaughtered. The meat and the intestines are served together with the injerra. Traditional beer (siwa)is brewed in the villages and is always served during ceremonial occasions.

Basic Economy. The Eritrean economy is totally dependent upon agricultural production. Over 75 percent of the population lives in the rural areas and conducts subsistence agricultural production, whereas 20 percent is estimated to be traders and workers. No major goods are produced for export, but some livestock is exported to the Arabian peninsula.

Land Tenure and Property. The granting of equal land right use to all citizens, irrespective of sex, ethnicity, or social class, has been a political priority for the EPLF since the days of the armed struggle. After independence, the Eritrean government passed a new land proclamation abolishing all traditional land tenure arrangements, and granting the ownership of all land to the Eritrean state exclusively. Accordingly, each citizen above the age of eighteen has the right to receive long-term usufruct rights in land in the place he or she resides. The Eritrean government has not yet fully implemented the new land proclamation, and land is still administered under traditional communal tenure forms. Land scarcity is widespread in Eritrea, particularly in the densely populated highland plateau. Thus, any reform touching upon the sensitive issue of access to land necessarily creates controversies.

Commercial Activities. Agricultural production and petty trade make up the bulk of the commercial activity in Eritrea. The informal economy is significant, since petty traders dominate the many marketplaces throughout Eritrea, where secondhand clothing, various equipment, and utensils are sold.

Major Industries. The marginal industrial base in Eritrea provides the domestic market with textiles, shoes, food products, beverages, and building materials. If stable and peaceful development occurs, Eritrea might be able to create a considerable tourism industry based on the Dahlak islands in the Red Sea.

Trade. Eritrea has limited export-oriented industry, with livestock and salt being the main export goods.

Division of Labor. In urban areas, positions are filled on the basis of education and experience. Key positions in civil service and government, however, are usually given to loyal veteran liberation fighters and party members.

A large share of trade and commercial activity is run by individuals from the Jeberti group (Muslim highlanders). They were traditionally denied land rights, and had thus developed trading as a niche activity.

Social Stratification

Classes and Castes. Eritrean society is divided along ethnic, religious, and social lines. Traditionally, there were low caste groups within many of the ethnic groups in the country. The last slave was reportedly emancipated by the EPLF in the late 1970s. The traditional elites were the landowning families. After land reforms both during and after the liberation struggle, however, these elites have ceased to exist. Generally, in the rural areas, the people live in scarcity and poverty and few distinctions between rich and poor are seen. In the urban areas, however, a modern elite is emerging, composed of high-ranking civil servants, business-people, and Eritreans returning from the diaspora in the United States and Europe.

Symbols of Social Stratification. In the rural areas, the better-off are able to acquire proper clothing and shoes. The rich may have horses or mules to carry them to the market. A sign of prosperity among the pastoral groups is the display of gold jewelry on women.

Political Life

Government. Eritrea is a unitary state with a parliamentary system. The parliament elects the president, who is head of state and government. The president appoints his or her own cabinet upon the parliament's approval.

No organized opposition to the government party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ; the re-named EPLF) is allowed in practice. The new constitution, which was ratified in May 1997 but not put fully into effect, guarantees the freedom of organization, but it is too early to say how this will influence the formation of political parties.

Leadership and Political Officials. The president of Eritrea, and the former liberation movement leader, Isaias Afwerki, is the supreme leader of the country. In addition to serving as president, he fills the roles of commander-in-chief of the armed forces and secretary-general of the ruling party, the PFDJ. He is held in high regard among large portions of the population because of his skills as the leader of the liberation movement. Former liberation movement fighters fill almost all positions of trust both within and outside the government.

Social Problems and Control. With the coming to power of the EPLF, strong measures were used to curtail the high rate of criminality in Asmara. At the turn of the millennium, Eritrea probably boasted some of the lowest crime rates on the continent. The people generally pride themselves in being hard working and honest, and elders often clamp down on youths who are disrespectful of social and cultural conventions.

Growing tensions between the lowland minority groups and the Tigrinya—reinforced by the Muslim-Christian divide and Ethiopia's support for Eritrean resistance movements—may threaten the internal stability in the country.

Military Activity. As a result of the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia, Eritrea was characterized as a militarized society in the early twenty-first century. The majority of the population between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five had been mobilized to the war fronts, and the country's meager funds and resources were being spent on military equipment and defense. Since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the country has had military border clashes with Yemen, Djibouti, and Sudan, in addition to the war with Ethiopia. This has led to accusations from the neighboring countries that Eritrea exhibits a militaristic foreign policy. There are indications that the Eritrean government uses the military to sustain a high level of nationalism in the country.

Social Welfare and Change Programs

The government of Eritrea is concentrating its development policies on rural agriculture and food self-sufficiency. Few resources are available to social welfare programs. Reconstruction of destroyed properties, resettlement of internally displaced people, and demobilization of the army are huge challenges facing the government. Few national or international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are allowed to implement social welfare programs on their own initiative.

NGOs and Other Associations

The Eritrean government prides itself on its policy of self-reliance, rejecting development aid projects that are not the priority of the government. The majority of international NGOs were expelled from the country in 1998, although all were invited back later due to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war with Ethiopia. The government restricts the development of national NGOs, and foreign aid has to be channelled through governmental organizations.

Gender Roles and Statuses

Division of Labor by Gender. Since subsistence agriculture is the main production activity in Eritrea, the division of labor is influenced by custom. Women's input in agricultural production is vital but certain tasks, such as plowing and sowing, are conducted only by men. Animals are generally herded by young boys, while young girls assist in fetching water and firewood for the household.

The Relative Status of Women and Men. Since Eritrean society is still highly influenced by customary principles, the status of women in many communities is inferior to that of men. The war of liberation, where female fighters served side by side with men, was believed to have changed the status of women. The EPLF culture of gender equality, however, did not penetrate deeply into the Eritrean patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, with the government's policies of modernization and gender awareness, changes are slowly occurring in the status of Eritrean women.

Marriage, Family, and Kinship

Marriage. Customary rules of marriage vary among the ethnic groups. Generally, girls marry at an early age, sometimes as young as fourteen. A large share of the marriages in the rural areas are still arranged by the family groups of concern.

Domestic Unit. Generally, people live together in nuclear families, although in some ethnic groups the family structure is extended. The man is the public decision-maker in the family, whereas the woman is responsible for organizing the domestic activities of the household.

Inheritance. Inheritance rules in Eritrea follow the customary norms of the different ethnic groups. Generally, men are favored over women, and sons inherit their parents' household possessions.

Kin Groups. The nuclear family, although forming the smallest kin unit, is always socially embedded in a wider kin unit. The lineage and/or clan hold an organizing function in terms of social duties and obligations and as a level of identity. With the exception of the Kunama who are matrilineal, all ethnic groups in Eritrea are patrilineal, that is, descent is traced through the male line.

Socialization

Infant Care. In all ethnic groups, children are raised under the strong influence of parents and close relatives, as well as neighbors and the kin group. While conducting domestic chores or working in the fields, mothers usually carry the infants on their backs.

Child Rearing and Education. From an early age, both boys and girls are expected to take part in the household's activities: boys as herders of the family's livestock, girls as assistants to their mother in domestic affairs. An increasing number of children is joining the formal educational system, although education sometimes conflicts with the children's household obligations. In some of the nomadic and seminomadic communities, children might be unable to regularly attend classes in the formal educational system.

In some ethnic groups, circumcision is used as an initiation ritual into adulthood. The majority of both Eritrean men and women are circumcised. Female circumcision, or female genital mutilation, is carried out both among Christians and Muslims, although the type of circumcision differs from clitoridectomy to infibulation (the removal of the labia and partial closing of the vagina by approximating the labia majora in the midline).

Higher Education. The institutions of higher education in Eritrea are few, and the only university, Asmara University, admits a limited number of students. In the rural areas most people take up farming, which does not presuppose any formal education. The better-off families and those with relatives abroad try to send their children to the United States or Europe for further education and work.

Etiquette

Eritreans pride themselves on being hard working and resilient, and they show great social responsibility. Respect for elders and authority is deeply rooted. Compared to the urban population of Asmara, the peasantry keeps a tighter social discipline in relation to open, public affection between two people of the opposite sex. Boys and men, however, are frequently seen holding hands as a sign of friendship.

All traditional foods are eaten using the right hand only and without the use of silverware. The left hand is considered impure.

Religion

Religious Beliefs. The population is almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims, with the number of Christians being slightly larger. In addition, there are some followers of traditional beliefs among the Kunama group. The Orthodox Christian tradition in Eritrea stretches back to the fourth century, and Orthodox Christianity forms an integral part of the Tigrinya cultural expression. Catholicism and Lutheranism are also represented. Some syncretism with traditional beliefs is found among both Christians and Muslims. The government has been criticized for discriminating against and persecuting the country's Jehovah's Witnesses.

Religious Practitioners. All Eritreans are either Christians or Muslims (except a few followers of traditional religion among the Kunama), thus the religious practitioners are the formalized clergy and ulama, respectively. Since the rural Eritrean community is deeply religious, the clergy and ulama have an influential position in the everyday lives of their followers.

Rituals and Holy Places. Since Christianity and Islam are equally recognized by the state, the main religious holidays of both faiths are observed, including both Christian and Muslim celebrations: Both Western and Ge'ez Christmas, the Epiphany, Id Al-Fetir, Good Friday and Ge'ez Easter, Id Al-Adha, and Mewlid El-Nabi.

Death and the Afterlife. The beliefs and practices concerning death, funerals, and the afterlife follow some of the norms of the two religions—Orthodox (Coptic) Christianity and Islam. Funeral practices, however, may vary among the ethnic subgroups who follow Islam.

Medicine and Health Care

The formal health care system is poorly developed. Poor sanitary conditions in the rural areas and lack of tap water create a high rate of infant mortality. Numerous other health problems, including malaria and HIV/AIDS, lack of food and proper water supplies, and lack of trained personnel, continue to burden Eritrea's development of an efficient health care system. Traditional medical beliefs are widespread in the rural areas.

Secular Celebrations

Upon gaining independence Eritrea changed its calendar from the Julian to the Gregorian. But the reckoning of time according to the Julian calendar exists unofficially and is known as the Ge'ez calendar. The official state holidays are: New Year's Day (1 January); International Women's Day (8 March); May Day (1 May); Liberation Day (24 May); Martyr's Day (20 June); Launching of Armed Struggle (1 September); Ge'ez New Year (11 September; 12 September in leap years); and Meskel (the finding of the true cross) celebrations (27–28 September).

The Arts and Humanities

Because of the protracted war of liberation, the development of arts and humanities has been hindered. Some new artists in postliberation Eritrea are emerging, however, with an artistic focus on the country's struggle for independence.

Support for the Arts. Since the Eritrean society is extremely poor, the government needs to prioritize its funds for development efforts, leaving little for the arts. However, some support is given to cultural shows and exhibits that portray the cultural variety of the Eritrean people. Support is also given to exhibits and shows that display the hardships and sacrifices of the thirty-year war of liberation.



Religious Procession - Asmara (Oct 2000)

The State of the Physical and Social Sciences

The Eritrean government gives priority to building academic capacity within scientific fields that relate to the reconstruction of the war-torn country. Priority is also given to research into the environment and agricultural production, in order to secure food self-sufficiency.



**Al Khulafa Al Rashiudin (Followers of the Right Path) Mosque
Asmara City (Oct 2000)**

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