



ETHIOPIA

Area: 435,184 square miles **Population:** 112.1 million

Capital: Addis Ababa **Ethnic Groups:** Oromo, 34.4%;

Amhara, 27%; Somali, 6.2%; Tigray, 6.1%; Sidama, 4%;

Gurage, 2.5%; Welayta, 2.3%; Afar, 1.7%; Hadiya, 1.7%; Gamo, 1.5%

Languages: Amharic (official), Orominga, Tigrinya, Guaragigna, Somali, Arabic, English, and more than 70 others

Religion: Christian (63%, of which Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, 44% and other Christian, 19%);

Muslim, 34%, other, 3% **Life Expectancy:** 66.6 years at birth

Literacy: 51.8% **Agriculture:** tef, coffee, cereals, pulses, cattle, hides.

Industry: food processing, beverages, textiles, chemical.

Exports: coffee, leather products, qat, gold

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 35 (comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.517 (Low #125/189; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



Recasting the Past

The world's oldest unequivocal human ancestors hail from Ethiopia. The fossil remains of *Australopithecus anamensis* are dated to between 4.2 and 3.8 million years ago and have caused scientists to rethink the shape of the human evolutionary tree once again. Recent history of the region also has been revised by new historical research. As a continental and hemispheric crossroads, Ethiopia displayed an astonishing cultural life that was well-known to the wider ancient world. Intercultural contact, international trade, and diplomacy were brought to the attention of the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (c.40-50 CE), the Greek traveler's handbook (of the lands around the Red Sea and beyond), which mentions Aksum (first to 10th centuries CE). Aksum was the site of an ancient empire and written language Ge'ez. Impressive architecture, silver, bronze, and gold coinage, and the introduction of Christianity (early fourth century) followed by conversion of the monarchy date to this time. Although Aksum declined, Christianity persisted in making its mark on the prosperous and independent state. In the face of the spread of Islam in the 7th century, Aksum had given refuge to the Prophet Mohammed's early followers (the First Hejira) and Christians had retreated to the central highlands of Ethiopia, where Christianity survived in isolation. The walled city of Harar preserves evidence of 82 mosques, three from the 10th century. At Lalibela, a remote monastic settlement, churches were carved out of the rocks as single monolithic blocks and formed into intricate sculptures in the 12th and 13th centuries. By the 15th century, the Solomonic empire's dynasty claimed heritage back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and was the largest geopolitical unit in northeast Africa. Its nagús (king) sent Persian Muslims and Ethiopian monks as his emissaries to Mamluk Egypt and Aragon in Spain, with the aim of obtaining religious treasures and artisans.

Throughout the next century, ambassadors carried out missions to Jerusalem, Rome, and Portugal. Their influence in medieval Europe has been overlooked until recently. During the regency of Empress Eleni (c.1440-1522), the dynasty confronted Islamic hostilities supported by rising Ottoman power in the region and turned to Christian allies. In a letter to the king of Portugal, the able author and diplomat Eleni sought a military alliance to help defeat the Ottomans. Portuguese troops arrived the year of her death and over the next two decades were decisive in maintaining autonomy for the African state. Only Empress Tayetu Betul (1856-1918), wife of Menelik II, would play such a significant role as a modern monarch. Remembered as the founder of Addis Ababa, Tayetu's influential rhetoric and actions in the Battle of Adwa (1896) helped Menelik II's army defeat the Italians and maintain sovereignty at the height of European imperialism. In 1923, the League of Nations voted to admit Abyssinia, the first independent African nation to be recognized by the international organization.

On the World Stage

Historians acknowledge Ethiopia as the only nation in Africa to escape colonization, but the lands did not escape conflict. The region remained in the international eye. The Maria Theresa thaler, a silver bullion coinage minted by the Hapsburgs became popular not only as general currency, but also to be melted down into Christian crosses, manufactured in a variety of artistic styles unsurpassed in the ancient or modern world. The sole woman to reign in her own right as *negeste negestat* ("queen of kings") was Zewditu (1876-1930). After accepting her father's throne, she encouraged education and established a council of elders, a precursor to parliament. In the 20th century, her successor Ras Tafari Makonnen became the last Ethiopian monarch as Emperor Haile Selassie (r.1930-1974). Selassie's long reign saw global support for the abolition of slavery in Africa and the successful defense against the incursions of Italy and devastating famines. In Jamaica, Rastafarians forged an African-derived religion of resistance and adopted their namesake Selassie as a divine figure. Haile Selassie also played an important role in the establishment of the Organization of African Unity, headquartered in Addis Ababa. Selassie's reign came to an end after a military coup replaced the monarchy with a socialist/Marxist government.

A long period of instability and repression followed. The group known as the Derg (Amharic for "committee"), a body of mid-level military men, ruled Ethiopia for the next 17 years. Out of this group Mengistu Haile Mariam rose to power, and in 1977 he was chosen as the Derg chairman. The Ethiopian government systematically hunted down, killed, and imprisoned thousands of suspected opponents and their supporters, especially students. Simultaneously, for 30 years, the government (first under Haile Selassie and later under Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam) waged war against the secessionist movement of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which desired independence for Eritrea, a province located in the north on the border of the Red Sea. Rebels, based in the western province of

Tigray, joined in the fighting, not for secession but for the removal of the Marxist regime. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) also fought against the Mengistu government, which collapsed in 1991, when forces entered Addis Ababa and ushered in a new era.

Crisis at the Crossroads of Africa

Tigrayan-born Meles Zenawi came to power and ruled from 1991 to 1995 as President, and as Prime Minister from 1995 to 2012. Credited with eliminating famine, reducing poverty, increasing economic growth, and improving infrastructure, he has been criticized for relinquishing Assab's port and initiating repressive policies, particularly among members of the opposition, political activists, and journalists. By the 21st century, fighting along the border between the Eritrea and Ethiopia had resulted in over 80,000 deaths and resulted in economic downturn in both economies. In 2002, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, a U.N.-founded entity, established that Badme, the disputed border territory at the heart of the long-standing conflict, belonged to Eritrea. Ethiopia largely ignored the ruling and border violence persisted.

In addition to the continuing border crisis, an Islamist militia ("al-Shabab") based in neighboring Somalia seized control of the capital Mogadishu and much of the country's southern region. Believing the Somali Islamists were a threat to regional security, Ethiopia threw its support behind Somalia's weak transitional government. The relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia improved under Meles, with Ethiopia helping to combat Muslim militants in Africa. In return, the U.S. gave Ethiopia staggering amounts in aid annually (about \$1 billion in 2020).

On April 2, 2018, Abiy Ahmed, a former military officer, minister of science and technology, and vice president of the Oromia region, was chosen to lead the ruling EPRDF coalition as the Prime Minister (PM) of Ethiopia. At 41, he was one of the youngest leaders in all of Africa. He was also Ethiopia's first prime minister from the country's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, who make up one-third of its over 100 million people. Dr. Abiy immediately set about implementing a reform agenda. He appointed a cabinet with half the posts filled by women, freed tens of thousands of political prisoners, and unblocked hundreds of censored websites. He lifted the state of emergency, legalized opposition groups that had been outlawed, dismissed military and civilian leaders suspected of corruption, and called for unity among the country's many ethnic groups. Additionally, PM Abiy and President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea announced a formal declaration of peace between their two nations in July 2018, officially ending the 20-year border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The peace declaration reopened economic, cultural, and diplomatic ties between the two countries and allowed many families to reunite after many years of separation. This agreement was hailed largely as a success. Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in February 2019 for ending the war with Eritrea and bringing greater freedoms to Ethiopia after decades of repression.

Since then, political conflict has flared up in Ethiopia with the Tigrayan region, a northern state that shares a border and cultural affinity with Eritrea, devolving into a bloody and brutal war from late 2020 into 2022. Ongoing interethnic tensions within the nation's ethnically based federal system of governance have quickly risen from land disputes to violence, forced evictions, hunger, and mass displacement, tarnishing Abiy's image and deeply dividing the diaspora. In an already ecologically vulnerable region, civil war, drought, and the COVID pandemic threaten fragmentation and further destabilization of the Horn of Africa, at a crossroads, yet again.

--- Candice Goucher, January 2022

Further Reading

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