The History of Eritrea

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Introduction

Eritrea, a nation situated in the Horn of Africa, boasts a rich and complex history stretching back millennia. Its territory, lying along the critical corridor of the Red Sea, has long been a crossroads where global cultures, religions, and economies collided and converged. The country's diverse topography and vibrant mix of peoples have shaped its unique identity, giving rise to a story marked by migrations, empires, religious transformations, and a tireless pursuit of self-determination.

From its earliest beginnings, human presence in Eritrea is evidenced by some of the region’s most significant paleoanthropological finds. These discoveries speak to an ancient legacy rooted deep in the distant past, where the rhythms of hunter-gatherer societies gave way to the rise of trade, agriculture, and organized kingdoms. The legendary Land of Punt, often described in pharaonic records as a mystical partner of ancient Egypt, is believed by many scholars to have included parts of the Eritrean coast, forging early connections between Africa and the ancient Mediterranean world.

As time progressed, the region that is now Eritrea became an integral part of powerful kingdoms, notably D’mt and later the Aksumite Empire. The bustling port of Adulis emerged as a crucial node in international commerce, linking Rome, India, Arabia, and inland Africa. The arrival of Christianity in the 4th century CE and the subsequent spread of Islam along the coast would forever imprint new religious and cultural layers on the Eritrean identity, triggering both moments of unity and episodes of fragmentation across the centuries.

Foreign domination played a central role in Eritrea’s modern history, beginning with Ottoman and Egyptian incursions, and later intensifying under Italian colonial rule. The Italians left an indelible mark on Eritrean cities, society, and infrastructure—even as their presence brought exploitation and ignited new forms of resistance. The transition from Italian to British control during the turbulence of the Second World War set the stage for the next phase: the deeply contested federation with Ethiopia and the eventual drive for independence.

The relentless thirty-year Eritrean War of Independence, fought against perhaps overwhelming odds, stands as one of the longest and most determined liberation struggles on the African continent. Victory finally arrived in 1991, ushering in a new era of hope and nation-building—yet also fresh challenges. The post-independence period brought both achievements and new conflicts, including a devastating border war with Ethiopia, as Eritrea grappled with the twin demands of development and security, political freedom and unity, all under intensive international scrutiny.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive account of Eritrea’s journey from ancient times to the present day. By tracing the threads of its diverse past—through kingdoms and sultanates, colonial rule and resistance, war and peace—it seeks to illuminate not only the ordeals and accomplishments of the Eritrean people, but also the enduring spirit that continues to define this remarkable country at the heart of the Horn of Africa.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Peoples of Eritrea: Geography and Ethnolinguistic Diversity

Eritrea, often described as a land of dramatic contrasts, is a nation whose very identity is inextricably linked to its unique geography and the rich tapestry of its ethnolinguistic groups. Situated in the Horn of Africa, this relatively small country boasts an astonishing range of landscapes, from the sun-baked plains of the Danakil Depression, one of the hottest places on Earth, to the cool, verdant highlands that dissect its interior. This geographical diversity has not only shaped historical settlement patterns and economic activities but has also fostered the development of distinct cultures and languages that contribute to Eritrea’s vibrant social fabric.

Stretching along more than 1,100 kilometers (680 miles) of Red Sea coastline, Eritrea occupies a strategically vital position at the mouth of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a narrow waterway connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. This maritime frontage has, for millennia, made Eritrea a crucial nexus for trade and cultural exchange between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the wider Afro-Eurasian world. The coastal lowlands, particularly around the ancient port of Adulis and modern-day Massawa, have historically served as gateways, facilitating the flow of goods, ideas, and people, and exposing the region to a myriad of external influences.

Moving inland from the arid coast, the terrain gradually ascends to the dramatic Great Rift Valley escarpment, leading to the central highlands. These highlands, with elevations often exceeding 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) and peaking at Mount Emba Soira at 3,018 meters (9,902 feet), offer a stark contrast to the lowlands. Here, a more temperate climate prevails, supporting rain-fed agriculture and denser populations. The highlands are deeply dissected by seasonal rivers and fertile valleys, which have historically provided refuge and sustained settled communities for thousands of years. The capital city, Asmara, itself sits atop this plateau, enjoying a milder climate than its coastal counterparts.

To the west of the highlands, the land slopes gently towards the border with Sudan, characterized by semi-arid plains and undulating hills. This western lowlands region, watered by rivers such as the Gash-Barka (also known as the Mereb in its upper reaches) and the Setit (Tekeze), offers pasture for nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists, and is also home to significant agricultural potential. The seasonal flow of these rivers, originating in the highlands, is crucial for sustaining both human and animal life in these drier zones. The ecological variety across Eritrea—from desert and semi-desert to savannah and highland forests—has necessitated diverse livelihood strategies and contributed to the unique adaptations of its various ethnic groups.

The geographical divisions within Eritrea have, to a large extent, mirrored its ethnolinguistic distribution. The country is home to nine officially recognized ethnolinguistic groups, each with its own language, distinct cultural practices, and historical ties to specific regions. This diversity, while a source of national richness, has also presented challenges in nation-building, as various groups have navigated their relationships with each other and with the central authority. The majority of these languages belong to either the Afro-Asiatic or Nilo-Saharan language families, reflecting ancient migrations and long-standing interactions within the broader East African and Nile Valley regions.

The largest ethnolinguistic group in Eritrea is the Tigrinya, who primarily inhabit the central and southern highlands. Their language, Tigrinya, is a Semitic language closely related to Tigre and Amharic, and has a rich literary tradition. The Tigrinya people are predominantly Christian, belonging to the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which shares historical and doctrinal roots with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Their agrarian lifestyle, centered on the cultivation of grains like teff, sorghum, and wheat, has been sustained by the fertile highland soils for millennia. Their strong cultural identity and historical presence in the highland plateau have positioned them as a numerically dominant and historically influential group within Eritrea.

Closely related to the Tigrinya are the Tigre people, who primarily reside in the northern and western lowlands, as well as parts of the coastal region. The Tigre language, also Semitic, is distinct from Tigrinya, though mutually intelligible to a certain extent. Unlike the largely Christian Tigrinya, the Tigre people are predominantly Muslim, reflecting the historical spread of Islam along the trade routes of the Red Sea and inland from Sudan. Many Tigre maintain a pastoral or semi-pastoral way of life, herding camels, goats, and cattle across the expansive lowlands, though settled agricultural communities also exist. Their vibrant oral traditions and distinct social structures differentiate them while highlighting shared linguistic roots with their highland neighbors.

Along the northern Red Sea coast and extending into the northern highlands are the Rashaida, a nomadic Semitic-speaking people who migrated to Eritrea from the Arabian Peninsula in the 19th century. They are easily recognizable by their distinctive black veils worn by women and their reliance on camel herding. The Rashaida are staunchly Muslim and maintain a highly conservative culture, preserving many traditions from their Arabian origins. Their presence adds another layer to Eritrea's coastal mosaic, demonstrating the ongoing historical flow of people and cultures across the Red Sea.

In the southern coastal plains and parts of the northern highlands live the Afar people, also known as the Danakil. Their language, Afar, belongs to the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. The Afar are renowned for their resilience in the harsh environment

of the Danakil Depression, where many continue a pastoralist existence, primarily herding camels and goats. Historically, they have been involved in the salt trade, extracting blocks of salt from the ancient lake beds for transport to the highlands. The Afar are predominantly Muslim, and their traditional clan-based social structure plays a significant role in their daily lives. Their distinctive martial traditions and deep knowledge of their challenging homeland are central to their identity.

The Saho people, another Cushitic-speaking group, inhabit the south-eastern highlands and coastal foothills. They are primarily agro-pastoralists, combining farming with the raising of livestock. The Saho are predominantly Muslim, with some Christian communities existing, particularly those who have historically interacted with the Tigrinya. Their social organization is characterized by a strong clan system, and their cultural practices often involve elaborate oral traditions and customary law. The Saho's proximity to both the highlands and the coast has made them historical intermediaries in trade and cultural exchange between these distinct regions.

The Bilen, a smaller Cushitic-speaking group, are concentrated in and around the town of Keren in the central highlands. They are mainly agriculturalists, cultivating a variety of crops, and are known for their distinct traditional dress and vibrant cultural heritage. The Bilen population is split between Christianity and Islam, reflecting historical conversions and influences from both highland Christian and lowland Muslim communities. Their language, Bilen, is part of the Agaw subgroup of Cushitic languages, highlighting ancient linguistic connections within the broader Horn of Africa.

In the southwestern lowlands, bordering Sudan, reside the Kunama (also known as the Baza) and the Nara people. The Kunama speak a Nilo-Saharan language and are distinct from the Afro-Asiatic groups. Traditionally, they are sedentary agriculturalists, cultivating sorghum and other grains in the fertile plains of the Gash-Barka region. They have largely maintained their traditional animist beliefs, though some have converted to Christianity or Islam due to external influences. The Kunama have historically faced challenges from neighboring groups, leading to a strong emphasis on community solidarity and defensive strategies.

The Nara, another Nilo-Saharan speaking group, also inhabit the western lowlands, near the Sudanese border. Like the Kunama, they are primarily agriculturalists, relying on the seasonal rains and rivers for their crops. The Nara are predominantly Muslim, a reflection of centuries of interaction with Islamic traders and communities from Sudan. Their social structure is traditionally organized around clans, and they possess a rich oral history and distinct cultural practices that set them apart from their Cushitic and Semitic neighbors. Their resilience in the semi-arid environment underscores their deep connection to the land.

Finally, the Hedareb (also known as the Beja or Beni-Amer, though Beni-Amer is a

specific sub-group) primarily inhabit the northern and western lowlands, extending into Sudan. They speak a Cushitic language, Beja, but many also speak Tigre due to extensive intermarriage and historical interactions. The Hedareb are largely nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, raising camels, cattle, and goats. They are predominantly Muslim and adhere to a tribal social structure with strong lineage ties. Their historical role in trade routes connecting the Red Sea coast to the Nile Valley has given them a unique position in the region's history.

This mosaic of peoples, each with its own language and traditions, forms the bedrock of Eritrean identity. While these groups have maintained distinct cultural practices, centuries of interaction, trade, intermarriage, and shared historical experiences, particularly the struggle for independence, have also forged a strong sense of national unity. Understanding the intricate relationship between Eritrea’s diverse geography and its ethnolinguistic composition is fundamental to comprehending the historical trajectories, societal developments, and enduring resilience of the Eritrean nation. The land has not merely been a stage for human drama; it has been an active participant, shaping cultures, dictating economies, and influencing the very course of history.

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