

Festival Eritra: a true cultural melting pot!

Written by Natnael Yebio W.
Sunday, 14 August 2016 09:57



It is that time of the year again, and the fact that it has been raining heavily makes it even more of a special occasion. I am talking about the Eritrean Festival. Annually in the last week of July and the first week of August Festival Eritrea is celebrated in the Asmara Expo ground for seven days and nights. The festival area is a location to witness the culture, tradition, music and dance of all ethnic groups in Eritrea.

The festival which was officially opened last Saturday by the President accompanied by Ministers, PFDJ heads, regional administrators, Army commanders, other governments' officials and religious leaders, has so far been attended by visitors from all walks of life. As this is a unique occasion for fostering national unity and the sole location embracing the culture, tradition, music and dance of all nine ethnic groups in Eritrea, it is a must visit occasion during the summer.

Kids wait for it with enthusiasm, Inventors toil for it the whole year, regional administrations prepare for it for the better half of the year, and tourists flock to Eritrea just because of it.

As a kid, as each summer approached, besides to playing soccer and not doing homework, the Eritrean festival was among the many other things I looked forward to. The festival gives you a sense of belonging, home is usually where you most feel comfortable and the Expo ground for seven days of summer is to a great extent, home to all nine Eritrean ethnic groups, inventors, different institutions, national associations and many others who are eager to show their ethnic groups characteristics and in the process prove the harmony Eritrea possess.

In a world characterized by religious segregation and interethnic conflicts, Eritreans, despite their diversity, have managed to live in harmony for hundreds of years. The multi-ethnic Eritrean society reflects different languages and cultures and as diverse as it may be, it is as harmonious as its marine biodiversity. The festival brings all aspects of the Eritrean natural, cultural, historical and archaeological heritages to one place so all Eritreans, from home and abroad, can enjoy them in spirit of unity and fervent patriotic feelings.

Over the last six days, each of the administrative regions (which is homes to several ethnic groups) on top of its life styles and cultural shows, has represented its core historical and natural endowments. One needs only to visit a regional pavilion to learn everything there is to know about a particular region.

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All six administrative zones accordingly are set in a regional pavilion of their own, decorated in all their splendour with images, exhibition and cultural programs.

Outside the regional pavilions the scene is entirely different. Replicas of houses and tents of all Eritrean nationalities and their living styles can be visited. Proudly representing their lifestyles, women crouch by open fires cooking or churning milk in goat skin leather bags as men tend after farming tools. Each group also has its own group of performers who play and sing all day long.



Tigre women swing their braided hair, while Afar women dance with the curved knives. The Rashaida girls in their finely embroidered traditional dresses welcome visitors to their huts while youngsters from the Bilen group concentrate on the sword dance. The impressive dance styles of the Hidareb and Kunama are not to be forgotten, last but not least Tigrigna ethnic group play their famous long pipes, as women and youngsters with traditional haircuts perform the typical round dance.

Speaking of hair-cuts and hair-dos, all nine ethnic groups have different hair styles that differ from age to age and gender to gender. It is quite remarkable the significant meaning each haircut has based on specific age, sex and ethnic groups.

This national festival, which one foreign visitor once aptly called Eritrea's cultural bonanza, provides a ground not only for interaction between local communities but also for encouraging the integration of local cultural traditions in to the boarder of national picture.

Festival Eritrea which traces its roots to the early 1980s during the years of the armed struggle for liberation has had an enormous impact on the preservation of Eritrean heritage and national identity, becoming a model for similar events held by Eritrean communities across the world.

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For kids it is time to go out with their parents or older siblings to have fun, take a picture with Tom and Jerry, eat a bite of Eritrea's finest food and take a turn at the swing set or slide. For the elderly it is a moment to once again proudly witness Eritrea's continuous harmony, for participants it is a chance to earn extra bucks, for the Eritrean diaspora it is a joyful opportunity to be among their people and experience being Eritrean first hand, while for Eritrea it is simply a bestowed blessing to have its harmonious diverse population in one place being what Eritrea is best at, celebrating being Eritrean.