

### Culture

Eritreans are culture-bound people with a deep sense of pride of their identity. Cultural development was an integral part of the liberation struggle and has remained so since Eritrea's independence, both as an expression of national identity and as a crucial foundation upon which the nation itself is built. During the armed struggle for liberation Eritrean cultural values played an important role in strengthening the commitment towards national unity and freedom. Today, those same values highlight the country's sovereignty, as they determine the country's aspirations, for peace and prosperity for all its citizens.

Each of the country's nine nationalities has its own oral and literary tradition, its music and dance, its architectures, its arts and crafts, and much more. Eritrea celebrates this rich heritage at all major celebrations and festivals, with performances and exhibitions that showcase the unique contribution of each group.

***Festivals and Holidays:*** The National Holidays Coordinating Committee in all six regions in the country as well as in the Diaspora plans and organizes celebrations, commemorations and festivals. The three major national holidays are; May 24-Independence Day, June 20-Martyr's Day, September 1st-Commomeration of the commencement of the Eritrean Revolution. Other public holidays include Christmas, Epiphany, Id Al-Fetir, Good Friday and Ge'ez Easter, Id Al-Adha, and Mewlid Al-Nabi.

Regional and national festivals, youth fairs, and cultural competitions are held throughout the country, organized by the local administrations and other organizations. The Eritrean media play a major role in promoting them, with extensive coverage on radio, TV, and newspapers.

The annual Eritrea Festival is held in Asmara every summer, attracting nearly 600,000 people and is the cultural event of the year. The festival features songs, dances and dramatic performances from all nine nationalities and much more in a continuous exposition that runs for ten days. Among the featured events and exhibits are models of traditional homes, arts and crafts shows, traditional food and refreshments, rites and ceremonies, special exhibitions of artistic and scientific merit, and highly competitive contests. Similar festivals are organized by Eritrean communities in the Middle East Europe, North America and Australia.

The Raimoc awards, whose name is derived from the Hidarb word for the beauty and grace of the long neck of an antelope, are represented to the individual and groups in Eritrea who most

excel at literature, music, painting, drama, traditional folklore and other categories. The annual prizes total as much as 400,000 Nakfa, and the competitions are fierce, from regional competitions that narrow the field to the finals held in Asmara in august

### ***Some Important Features Of Eritrean Culture***

**The coffee ceremony:** Strong, aromatic coffee is often drunk in Eritrea in an elaborate ritual that brings families and their guests together in an hour-long ceremony at the close of a long work day. It is usually served in thimble-size, handle-less cups and accompanied by trays of fresh popcorn and raisins, Hmbahsa (bread) and other local specialties.

Typically, the woman of the household scatters strands of fresh grass on the floor to provide the freshness of the outdoors, as she roasts green coffee beans over a charcoal fire, shaking them frequently to prevent burning. Once they are blackened and are ready for grinding, she lets the fresh fragrance waft under the nose of family members and friends and then grounds the beans into a powder.

The coffee is repeatedly heated to a boil in a round clay pot with a thin, stem-like neck, as frankincense burns nearby. Participants are expected to partake at least three rounds of the full-boiled brew, between which tall glasses of the local beer, Suwa, are often served.

**Cuisine:** Traditional Eritrean cuisine is spicy and has distinctive flavour. Many tourists like to try the local cuisine and are encouraged to do so by the locals. Fortunately many local food cuisines are available in almost all restaurants accessible to tourists in Eritrea.

Typically, Eritrean cuisine consists of various stews (tsebhi) made from vegetables and meat, and served atop a large, flat sour-dough bread called injera or tayta. Many vegetarian dishes are available, since a majority of the population observe fasting at some time during the year. Eating is accomplished without utensils by tearing a piece of injera (strictly using the right hand), then scooping some stew, vegetables or salad with the bread.

On visiting an Eritrean household, it is polite to decline at least three times if asked to dine. Usually the host will say “bizay kelalem”, after which the guest may agree to dine. This process ensures that one does not seem too eager to eat at another’s household.

### ***THE ARTS***

**Architecture:** Eritrea's major cities exhibit strong colonial influences, as with Asmara's Florentine and art deco styles and Massawa's Turkish and Egyptian styles. However, its smaller towns and villages each have a character of their own, drawn from the cultural heritage of the nationalities living there.

Asmara has a profusion of well-preserved office buildings, hotels, cinemas, residence and service centres that reflect architectural styles as varied as internationalist, futurist, rationalist and neoclassical. There are massive stepped towers and brick string-courses, Doric columns and hand crafted wrought-iron gates, curved corner entrances and porthole windows, gardens and elegant villas with marble staircase, louvered shutters, curving balustrades and shay porticos.

Asmara also houses the region's first synagogue, built in 1905, in the neoclassical style; the Kulafah Al Rashidin (great mosque), built in 1938 and combining rationalists, classical and Islamic styles; and a towering catholic cathedral, built in 1923, that is said to be one of the finest Lombard-Romanesque-style churches outside Italy.

Massawa is noted for its covered passageways and coral-block houses, with their trellised balconies and finely-carved wooden doors and shutters. In the heart of Massawa island is the 500-year-old Sheikh Hanafi Mosque. A short walk from there, on nearby Taulud Island, is the soon-to-be-restored 16th century palace of the Turkish Osdemir Pasha that overlooks the busy harbour, where brightly coloured, hand-crafted dhows furl their classic triangular lateen sails and offload cargoes.

In the cooler highlands, most rural Tigrinya-speaking families live in flat-roofed, rectangular houses, hidmo, with dry stone exterior walls and thick interior wooden pillars that define separate spaces for sleeping, food preparation and the stabling of farm animals. In the hot arid lowlands, most people live in circular single-room dwellings, constructed out of sun-dried adobe, dried sticks or grass and crowned with conical thatched roofs.

### **Music and Dance**

Every nationality in Eritrea has its musical traditions and its distinctive dances, usually performed to the rhythm of intricate, locally-produced instruments. These may include single-or multi-stringed (watas and kirars), flutes of varying lengths, drums, rattles and tambourines, sometimes played together with modern amplified instruments. Many mark major events in life, such as birth and marriage, or celebrate important religious or community festivals. There is also a growing popular music culture in the major urban centers, which draws on and reinterprets traditional themes.

**Literature:** The nation's rich oral and literary tradition ranges across all nine nationalities and includes a wealth of poetry and proverbs, songs and chants, folk tales, histories and legends. Until recently, most of Eritrea's written literature was religiously based. Since independence, however, new works of poetry, drama, narrative fiction and memoir have appeared.

**Painting** :The most common traditional painting, usually done on skin, parchment or event canvas, depict religious themes and fables or abstract designs and shapes in "storyboard" forms. Most church walls are painted with colourful and dramatic murals. More modern styles developed during the liberation struggle, varying from harsh realism to highly symbolic renderings of social and political themes. Portraiture and landscape art have also become common.

**Theatre:** Drama is almost always a reflection of Eritrean people's history. Traditionally, it was used to celebrate religious festivals. It usually involved music, singing, dancing and acting. During the liberation of struggle, short skits and full-length plays depicted historical events and cultural practices, interpreted political and social issues, and entertained and amused large audiences throughout the country. Since independence, new works, some carefully scripted, others more improvisational have begun to appear. Many playwrights started to flourish some of whose work has even been translated in English and been performed in many parts of the world. Drama is mostly produced during the national holidays that would reflect the historical and social trends of the Eritrean society.

The young film industry is also boosting up. About 60 movies are produced annually. These movies reflect contemporary social life, true stories of struggle for independence and other affairs that concern the society.

### **Crafts**

**Pottery:** Ceramic work constitutes one of Eritrea's oldest crafts, for pottery products grace nearly every household. Slender necked pots, djebena are parts of the classic Eritrean coffee ceremony, just as clay pots, tsahli, are integral to the spicy chicken stews served on most festive occasions. Also ubiquitous in rural households are the large ceramic water pots, known as utro, and the brightly-painted irregularly-shaped incense holders. Today, in the urban centres, one can also find hand made ceramic flower vases, candle holders, ashtrays and other household objects.

**Weaving & Basket-making:** Much of Eritrean basketwork derives from its uses in the preparation, serving and storage of food- from breakfast plates and bread basket to " lunch boxes" taken by farmers and herders to the fields- but there is a growing trade basketry intended solely for decoration, such as colourful table mats, wall-hangings and centrepieces.

**Jewelry:** Finely-worked gold and silver earrings, necklaces, bracelets and rings are commonly given to women on their wedding day. While precious metals are more rare in the country-side, many rural women have jewelry strung together from beads and worn around their heads, necks, wrists, and ankles. Among the other highly prized traditional metal works are Orthodox crosses made of silver and brass.

**Leather work:** Traditional leatherwork is often decorated with beads and cowry shells, though locally tanned leather is often used to cover handmade stools, seats, baskets, and drums. There is also a growing trade of fashionable handbags, shoes, belts, and coats. As Eritrea has banned wildlife hunting and trade in wildlife products, all leather products are derived from domesticated animals.

**Wood-carving:** Many Eritrean carvers use the pale wood from the olive tree to produce picture frames, bowls, salt and pepper shakers, candle holders, small shields, and other house hold items, some functional, some purely decorative. Colourful porcupine quills are worked into the design. Other local wood is used to make rough-hewn chairs and tables, low –rise stools, camel saddles and t-shaped pillows intended to keep the head away from potential snake, scorpion, or spider bites.

### **Museums & Libraries**

The National Museum is headquartered in Asmara; it is in the process of establishing a network of regional centres as well. One is already established in Massawa. It includes exhibits on all the ethnic groups of Eritrea, the country's main archaeological site and the 30-year independence war.

The Research and Documentation Center (RCD) houses the archives from the liberation war and is a repository for many other historical documents, oral and written histories, photographs, maps, charts, and other visual records. It is negotiating the return of valuable lost documents and artefacts from individuals, government, and other institutions, and it is collecting recently published works of historical and artistic merit. In the future, the RCD will develop into an autonomous National Library and Archives.

### ***The Echo of the ancestors***

East Africa is rich in history and archaeological findings. Eritrea also has the blessings of these dazzling findings. There are many legacies the ancestors left behind. Many findings show that there was a great civilization in the area. A simple visit to the museum in Asmara, and Massawa, can teach us a lot about these facts. Some of the most important findings include:

**The Buya Findings:** the remains of the previous ancestors became a new venture in archaeological sites in Buya. This place is found 110kms south west of Massawa. A female skull and remaining of extinct types of elephants (*Elephas Recki*) is found in the area. The remaining of the elephant reduces the gap of one type of elephant found between Tanzania and Kenya. The remainings can be found today in the Museum in Asmara.

**Adulis:** During 2000B.C. this area was a gateway between central Africa and the Arab and Asia Lands. From 240 B.C. onwards the place became a hot spot for commerce. Later on, the Axumite kingdom used Adulis as its gate for commercial purposes.

**Dahlak Islands:** After the fall of the port Adulis in 8th century B.C. Dahlak islands rose as a new commercial route. Different materials such as turtle backs, elephant trunks, slaves and others passed through the islands to the Arab and Asian lands. It is also identified as a source of development and expansion of Islam in the horn of Africa. We can find Kufian scriptures of 8th-12th A.D. in the grave stones in the area. There are also traditionally-built wells in the area by the ancestors as water is scarce in the area.

**Kohayto and Metera:** Perhaps the most popular archaeological sites in Eritrea are Kohayto and Metera found in the Southern Region of Eritrea. Kohayto emerged as a town in about 800-400 B.C. long before the rise of Axumite Kingdom (1stA.D). This place has an influence of three civilizations known as Da'amat from the Arabic land. Its exotic artefacts prove that it holds a rich history of a trade route connecting the highlands of Eritrea and Ethiopia to the coastal areas of Adulis.

### ***Art & Culture Organizations***

The Cultural Heritage Project (recently renamed the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project) seeks to conserve monuments and heritage sites, conserve the environment and support living

## Eritrea At A Glance IV

Written by shabait Administrator

Sunday, 15 November 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 04 March 2010 03:24

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cultures. It works in collaboration with the National Museum, the University of Asmara and other community-based organizations throughout the country to heighten public awareness of Eritrea's exceedingly rich cultural resources, ancient and modern, and to help manage this legacy.

Among the many new organizations nurturing and promoting modern art and music are the Asmara Art Club. The Eritrean Library is active in developing and stocking public libraries in all regions of the country.

International cultural organizations and agencies represents in Eritrea include the British Council, Alliance Française, the Eritro-German club, Casa Degli Italiani, the pavoni Library and others.