



▲ AFRICA

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Ethiopia, a landlocked and mountainous country on the Horn of Africa, covers 435,184 square miles (1,127,127 square kilometers); this is about the size of California and Texas combined. It has access to the Red Sea through a port in Djibouti. Ethiopia has a variety of climates and terrains. The Great Rift Valley, which is subject to earthquakes, separates the northwestern highlands from the southeastern mountains. Located at an elevation of 8,000 feet (2,400 meters) in the center of the country, the capital city of Addis Ababa has a moderate climate. Most lakes are situated along the Great Rift Valley. The largest, Lake Tana, is the source of the Blue Nile. Many rivers originating in Ethiopia flow to neighboring countries.

In the western lowlands, the hottest days average 95°F (35°C) but can rise to 120°F (49°C). Temperatures in the highlands average between 60°F (16°C) and 74°F (23°C). The rainy season is from mid-June to mid-September in the highlands, and the period from October to February is extremely dry. Rainfall varies widely from year to year, a factor that causes extreme problems for agriculture and animal husbandry, the two main sources of sustenance for Ethiopians. Despite its rocky and arid landscapes, however, Ethiopia is home to a great variety of plant and animal species.

**History.** Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa, known anciently as Abyssinia. Legend has it that Ethiopian monarchs are descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Ethiopians converted to Christianity during the Axumite period and primarily under the reign of King Ezana in the fourth century A.D. The Solomonic dynasty lasted until 960, when it was replaced by the Zague dynasty. The Solomonic dynasty returned to power from 1267 to 1974,

though it was often divided by warfare between opposing factions. Christian Ethiopia began warring with neighboring Islamic states in the 13th century and was nearly defeated in the 16th century by Ottoman Turks. Islam first gained influence in Ethiopia in the 17th century.

Around 1885, Italy colonized the coast and tried to move inland. It was defeated at Adwa in 1896 by the Ethiopian army under Emperor Menilek II. That victory spared Ethiopia further aggression until the 1930s. Mussolini's Italian army invaded and occupied Ethiopia in 1935. In 1941, the British helped exiled Emperor Haile Selassie I regain control. He had been Ras Tafari Makonen, regent to the Empress Zauditu (daughter of Menilek II) during the 1920s. He took the throne from the empress and declared himself Emperor Haile Selassie I. His autocratic rule after 1941 created the economic and political turmoil that led to his fall in 1974. When he died a year later, the country was declared a socialist state called the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Mengistu Haile-Mariam came to power in 1977 as leader of the provisional government. A 1987 constitution established a national assembly, which elected Mengistu president. He ruled as a dictator. Mengistu faced several problems, including an ongoing civil war (that began in 1961) between government forces and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Other ethnic groups were also working to topple the government. The fighting, the Marxist economy, and poor harvests brought severe famine to millions of Ethiopians in the 1980s.

An attempted 1989 coup prompted Mengistu to announce economic reforms in 1990, but fighting intensified in 1991 and Mengistu left the country. When rebels surrounded Addis Ababa, the government collapsed. The Ethiopian People's

## Ethiopia

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assumed central power. At the same time, the EPLF took control of Eritrea, which gained full independence in 1993. Eritrea granted Ethiopia access to the sea through the port city of Massawa, and the two nations established close ties.

The new Ethiopian leader, Meles Zenawi of the EPRDF, set up a provisional government to sponsor multiethnic elections under a new constitution. Multiparty elections were held in May 1995, but some parties boycotted the polling to protest the EPRDF's domination of the electoral process. The EPRDF swept most seats in a landslide victory. Meles became prime minister. Ethiopia was renamed the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The country began to repatriate thousands of refugees stranded in Sudan and started developing a viable economy. However, political tensions continued to divide people, making it difficult for the nation to establish democratic institutions.

Relations with Eritrea were strained in 1997 when Eritrea stopped using the Ethiopian currency, and relations broke down completely in 1998 over a border dispute. Fighting escalated into full-scale war, killing some 100,000 people. A peace treaty ended the war in June 2000. However, despite a border demarcation ruling by an international court of arbitration, the two countries have still failed to resolve the border issue.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Ethiopia's population of 66.6 million is growing by about 2 percent per year. The Amhara ethnic group of northwestern Ethiopia accounts for about 30 percent of the population. The Tigreans in the north comprise almost 12 percent. The Oromo (35 percent) live in central Ethiopia, while the Somali (6 percent) live in the southeast. Other groups include the Beni-Shangul, Afar, Sidamo, Guraghe, and Walayta. At least another 65 very small ethnic groups live in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa is the nation's largest city, with more than three million residents.

Historical tensions between various regions remain a problem, and small guerrilla movements still fight for separation. Some groups oppose the government's demarcation of state boundaries based on ethnic majorities. These factors have helped intensify ethnic tensions, and critics allege the EPRDF is encouraging ethnic conflict by organizing the government along ethnic lines rather than stressing shared identities.

**Language.** Amharic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic, is the official national language and is used in commerce and administration. It and Tigrinya are written in a Sabian script. Oromifaa is written in a Latin script. Somali, Guaraginga, Arabic, and more than 80 other languages (of which there are more than 200 dialects) are spoken in Ethiopia. Rural people often speak only their own particular dialect. Residents of towns and cities usually speak Amharic or Oromifaa in addition to their native language. Ge'ez is the ancient Sabian language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church used in prayers and worship. English is taught in secondary schools, but only the educated urban elite can speak it.

**Religion.** About 45 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a leading influence in the culture since the fourth century. Indeed, Ethiopian Christians stress that while Christianity was introduced by European colonizers in other African countries, it was adopted by Ethiopian rulers in A.D. 332—before many Western nations were exposed to it. Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine is most similar to Roman Catholicism in its emphasis on celebrating Mass and reverenc-

ing icons and patron saints. Some people living around Axum claim that the biblical Lost Ark of the Covenant is in their hands, but they have not permitted anyone to see it. The average Ethiopian has little knowledge of this lost ark, but there are many arks of covenant (called *tabots*) in the country's various churches. During religious holidays, arks in the region are gathered together for a celebration. On feast days in each month, certain saints, angels, and religious fathers are remembered by those Christians who have chosen them as patrons. Christianity's legacy can be seen in many ancient structures, including stone churches in Lalibela.

Muslims account for 35 percent of the population, generally among the Oromo. Most Ethiopian Jews have migrated to Israel in recent years. Other Ethiopians follow traditional religious beliefs that stress a reverence for all living things.

**General Attitudes.** Although attitudes vary widely among Ethiopia's many ethnic groups, one common trait is friendliness. Ethiopians generally appreciate others who are humble, honorable, and pleasant. Aggressive, loud, or demanding behavior demonstrates poor character. Ethiopians are often reluctant to show emotion, a characteristic attributed to the nation's years of hardship. Courtesy and concern for others also pervade the Ethiopian personality. Most Ethiopians are concerned about finding or maintaining a source of income and will do whatever is necessary to provide for their families.

Despite many years of conflict, most individuals favor peaceful solutions to problems and look forward to greater prosperity and harmony. However, the war with Eritrea strengthened nationalist feelings in Ethiopia, and many considered victory a matter of national pride; this is one factor that has kept a resolution at bay.

**Personal Appearance.** For the most part, Ethiopian men and women working as professionals or in offices wear Western-style clothing. Most other women wear traditional dresses. Rural people often are performing agricultural tasks and do not have time to concentrate on their physical appearance. Thus, villagers may appear neat and clean only on occasion; those who are always well dressed are held in derision.

For holidays and other important occasions, Ethiopians of the northern and central regions wear traditional white cotton clothing decorated with various designs. Some items are embroidered in bright colors; others are bordered in hand woven silk. A matching cloth covers women's heads. This cloth is also used as a shawl by both men and women.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Greetings are courteous and warm in Ethiopia. Relatives and friends often kiss on each cheek. New acquaintances shake hands gently with one or both hands. Phrases vary among ethnic groups, but some form of "How are you?" is typical. In Amharic, friends and peers say *Endemin neh?* to a male or *Endemin nesch?* to a female. A more formal Amharic greeting is *Tena Yistilin* (God give you health). In Oromifaa, one greets members of either sex with *Akam jirta?* The Tigrinya form is *Kamelaha?* for a man or *Kamelehee?* for a woman.

In all areas of Ethiopia, one greets an elderly person by lowering or bowing the head to show deference. The elderly greet grandchildren by kissing them on the forehead; in return, they receive kisses on their knees. People are addressed by their titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Doctor, etc.) and given names. There are no surnames. One's given name is followed by one's father's given name, which is not used to address that person. Parents can be greeted by the name of their first child (e.g.,

“How are you, Mary’s father?” or “Hello, Solomon’s mother”).

**Gestures.** Ethiopians keep a reasonable distance during conversation and avoid prolonged eye contact. Pointing with the finger or foot is not appropriate; one uses the entire hand. People avoid passing items or food with the left hand. Keeping one’s hands at the side (not in pockets) during conversation is considered polite. Trilling the tongue is an expression of excitement or happiness. Slowly nodding the head indicates reflection or sorrow; quicker nods indicate agreement. Walking between two or more conversing people is considered rude. It is customary for people to treat the elderly with respect and deference.

**Visiting.** In Ethiopia, visiting is an important social function. Rural dwellers visit friends and family frequently and without advance notice. They are always warmly welcomed. Hosts nearly always serve guests something to drink. In most cases, men and women converse freely and enjoy a relaxed visit. In some Muslim homes, men and women do not socialize together. Many people in the east meet to chew *chat*, a leafy plant that produces a mildly stimulating effect when chewed. One removes the shoes when chewing *chat* or when in a Muslim home.

Urban visits may also occur unannounced between family and friends, but advance invitation or notice generally is required of others. Ethiopians enjoy inviting friends over for an evening of socializing, although the Amhara consider the home to be highly private.

**Eating.** Ethiopians eat two or three daily meals, depending on their income. Children eat separate from or before their parents, except on holidays or on special occasions. People wash their hands before the meal is served; the father, the oldest person, or any guest washes first. Diners eat from a common platter, taking food with the fingers of the right hand from the space on the platter directly in front of them. In most areas, hosts expect guests to eat and drink without reservation. Hosts may occasionally say, “Please eat,” until the food is finished. After the meal, people enjoy coffee, which often is served with elaborate ceremony. Urban Ethiopians may go to a community teahouse or restaurant after market day, but eating out is traditionally frowned upon as lazy or a sign of a poor home life.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The extended family is strongly patriarchal throughout Ethiopia. Sons usually bring their brides to live with or near their father’s family, and three or more generations in the male line frequently live under one roof or in one family compound. Polygamy is common among Muslims. Age is highly respected in Ethiopia, and adult children care for their elderly parents. Only 3 percent of the population is older than age 65.

In rural areas, a father builds a separate house in the compound for each son before a wedding. He also gives each son a plot of land to farm. In the absence of the father, the eldest adult son leads the family. Women are responsible for household and compound upkeep and for child care. Their duties and privileges are well-defined and they often lead sheltered lives. While women may have certain legal rights, such as property inheritance, cultural practice often overrides these rights. Many men died during the years of fighting. The resulting female-headed households tend to be the poorest and most marginalized in the country.

**Dating and Marriage.** Western-style dating is becoming common in large cities, where young people more often choose

their spouses. In more traditional settings, marriage represents the union of two families, and individual choice of spouse is limited. Weddings can be costly, elaborate family events lasting two or three days.

**Diet.** Porridge made from corn, barley, oats, or sorghum flour boiled with milk is the most common food in nearly all regions of the country. The porridge is flavored with butter and eaten with a wooden spoon. The Guraghe enjoy *kitfo*, a finely chopped, raw red meat mixed with butter, cheese, and cabbage. *Kitfo* is served with *koocho*, a bread prepared from the stem of a plant called *inset*. *Injera* and *wat* are popular highland dishes. *Injera*, used as bread, is made from a native grain known as *teff*, while *wat* is a stew made with chicken, beef, or vegetables. *Berberere*, a red hot pepper, is often used to spice *wat* or is served separately with raw meat. Available fruits include oranges, bananas, mangoes, papaya, avocados, grapes, tomatoes, and lemons. The most common vegetables are potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and onions.

Strict religious dietary and fasting customs affect what Ethiopians eat. For example, Orthodox Christians do not eat pork or meat from closed-hoofed animals; they also abstain from dairy products and meat on Wednesdays, Fridays, and during Lent (the 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter). Muslims do not eat pork. During the holy month of *Ramadan*, they fast from sunrise to sundown each day.

**Recreation.** Urban Ethiopians watch television, go to sporting events, eat at restaurants, go to movies, take their children out for sweets, and so forth. Rural residents rarely have access to electricity. They go to community meetings, attend their local burial society meeting (*idir*) or savings club (*equib*), and play with their children. All Ethiopians enjoy visiting friends and relatives. Chess, checkers, and cards are popular games. Soccer is the most popular sport for men and boys, along with track-and-field. Rural sports include *gena* (like field hockey) and *guugs* (horse racing). Women usually do not play sports but socialize at home.

**The Arts.** Early Ethiopian Christians built many ancient structures, including 11 churches in Lalibela carved from stone in the 12th and 13th centuries. The walls of these churches are often covered with paintings. Mosques reflect broader Islamic architecture. Most art was religious until the 1930s, when European influences brought new styles. Painters have since explored various subjects and styles.

Music is used in religious ceremonies and for entertainment. Following the Mengistu dictatorship, when censorship and other government control of music performance and production were rife, popular and traditional music flourished again. Special instruments include the *begena* (lyre), the *kebero* (drum), and the *tsenatsil* (a kind of rattle). *Azmaris* (traveling singers) are important to the musical tradition. Despite Western influences, Ethiopian music remains popular. Other traditional arts include basket weaving, embroidery, carpet weaving, and jewelry.

**Holidays.** Major holidays include the Victory of Adwa (2 Mar.), Victory Day (5 May), Downfall of the Communist Regime (28 May), Ethiopian New Year (in September), and *Meskel* (Finding of the True Cross; end of September).

In addition to the various holidays for saints and angels, Christians celebrate Christmas (7 Jan.), Epiphany (20 Jan.), and Easter (Friday–Sunday). Muslims mark *Id al-Fatar* (three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*), *Id al-Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice, also called *Arefa*), and *Moulid* (birth of the prophet Muhammad).

## Ethiopia

*Meskel* was celebrated before the advent of Christianity and Islam and has been adapted by all faiths. It comes at the end of winter. Each religion or culture celebrates it in different ways, but some customs are similar. Urban people visit friends and relatives in the countryside. On the eve of *Meskel*, each person places a tree branch vertically into a pile. There is a dance around the pile, and a community elder then lights the branches on fire. In the morning, most families slaughter a sheep or goat for a feast; some people pool their money to buy a bull. Families and neighbors gather to eat, sing, and dance.

Ethiopia follows the Coptic calendar. Each of 12 months has 30 days, and a 13th month has 5 or 6 days. There is a seven-year difference between the Coptic and Gregorian calendars. Therefore, 2004 in Western societies is 1997 in Ethiopia. Also, the 24-hour day begins at sunrise, not midnight, so 7 a.m. is locally called "one o'clock."

**Commerce.** Business is conducted using Western time and calendar standards. In large cities, offices are open from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. Saturday hours are 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Government offices close at 6 p.m. on weekdays. Rural Ethiopians generally produce their own food and rely on open-air markets for products such as soap, sugar, clothing, and so on. Urban residents purchase most items from markets.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** Ethiopia is divided into 10 ethnically based administrative regions. Each has its own parliament and council of ministers, but leaders are ultimately responsible to the federal government. The prime minister (currently Meles Zenawi) is head of government and has strong executive authority. A ceremonial president (currently Girma Woldegiorgis) is head of state. Parliament's upper Federal Council (108 members) is elected by regional parliaments. The lower Council of People's Representatives (548 members) is elected by popular vote. Representatives in both bodies serve five-year terms.

**Economy.** Nearly all Ethiopians are subsistence farmers with little or no access to the resources necessary to pursue goals beyond feeding and clothing a family. Only about 12 percent of the land is arable. Rural wealth is often measured by the size of a person's herds. Coffee is the main cash crop, accounting for more than half of all export earnings. Other important crops include *teff*, wheat, millet, pulse, and barley. Ethiopia also exports animal hides. Drought, soil erosion, and war have all contributed to the poor economy and periodic famines. Despite its poverty, Ethiopia has the potential to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Areas of focus include mining and gold exploration. The currency is the *birr* (ETB).

**Transportation and Communications.** In cities, transportation is relatively easy to find and is affordable for the majority of Ethiopians. Taxis, buses, and a train that travels between Addis Ababa and the country of Djibouti are available. Ethiopian Airlines company operates with relative efficiency. Outside of major towns, people travel on foot, horseback, camels, donkeys, or mules.

The telephone network in major cities and towns is fairly good, although public phones are in short supply and direct-

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank . . . . .	169 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women . . . . .	139 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita . . . . .	\$810
Adult literacy rate . . . . .	48 percent (male); 32 (female)
Infant mortality rate . . . . .	103 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy . . . . .	45 (male); 47 (female)

dial services are not always available. Rural residents rely on the mail and word of mouth for communication. One television station and four radio stations broadcast in Ethiopia.

**Education.** Education is not yet compulsory in Ethiopia, and less than half of all school-aged children are enrolled. About one-third of all students finish primary schooling, which begins at age seven, and go on for secondary school at age thirteen. Girls attend less often than boys; only one-fourth of adult women are literate. Until 1991, many children (who have now reached adulthood) fought in the civil war and were unable to get an education. Primary school instruction is in the chief language of each region.

**Health.** Addis Ababa has some medical facilities, but most Ethiopians do not have access to proper medical care. The nation has few physicians, life expectancy remains very low, and infant mortality is extremely high. Malnutrition and diseases such as malaria, meningitis, cholera, and yellow fever are common, and outbreaks wreak havoc because few citizens are vaccinated. Only about one-fourth of the population has access to safe water.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- In an effort to avert a renewal of violence between their nations, Ethiopia and Eritrea agreed in December 2003 to establish a forum for regular meetings between their military leaders. The status of their disputed border remains an ongoing source of friction.
- Many of Ethiopia's farmers have replaced their coffee bean crops with *chat* crops over the past five years due to a sharp drop in coffee prices. Researchers estimate that coffee production has fallen nearly 20 percent since 1998 in the Harar province, a region renowned worldwide for the quality of its coffee beans. If coffee prices fail to recover, *chat* may replace coffee as the nation's largest export within the next ten years.
- In parliamentary elections held in 2000, the ruling EPRDF won a large majority of seats and Meles retained power, being strengthened by the nationalist fervor over the war with Eritrea. Eight opposition parties contested seats in the elections, and most complained of harassment and voting irregularities.

**Contact Information.** Embassy of Ethiopia, 3506 International Drive NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 364-1200; web site [www.ethiopianembassy.org](http://www.ethiopianembassy.org).

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