



# Ethiopia

## Introduction

Official Name: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
Nationality: Ethiopian  
Area: 1,127,127 square kilometers (435,186 square miles)  
Languages: Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali, Guaraginya, Sidaamu-afoo, English, other indigenous languages  
Currency: birr (ETB)  
Location: Eastern Africa, bordered by Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan

## Statistical Information

Population	76.5 million
0-14 years	43.4 percent
15-64 years	53.8 percent
65+ years	2.7 percent
Birth rate	37 births/1,000
Death rate	15 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	5.1 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	2.272 percent
Life expectancy	49.2 years
Literacy	42.7 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	4.4 percent
Below poverty line	38.7 percent
Ethnic groups	32.1 percent Oromo 30.1 percent Amhara 6.2 percent Tigray 5.9 percent Somali 4.3 percent Gurage 3.5 percent Sidama 17.8 percent other
Religion	50.6 percent Orthodox 32.8 percent Muslim 10.2 percent Protestant 4.6 percent traditional 1.8 percent other

*\*Unofficial sources place the number of Muslims above 40 percent, with an equivalently lower percentage of Orthodox Christians.*

## Economy

Ethiopia has a poverty-stricken economy which is highly based upon agriculture. The agricultural section suffers from frequent droughts and inefficient cultivation practices. Coffee has been the major Ethiopian export, but continually low market prices for coffee have forced some farmers to switch to qat, a tropical evergreen plant whose leaves are used as a stimulant, to bolster their income. Recurrent droughts and the 1999-2000 war with Eritrea have been hard on the economy. In 2001, Ethiopia qualified for debt relief from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. Under Ethiopia's current land distribution system, the government owns all land and sells long-term leases to tenants. This hampers industrial growth, as entrepreneurs cannot use land as collateral. Normal weather patterns from 2004 to 2007 have helped the economy begin to recover from years of drought.

## Government

Capital: Addis Ababa

Ethiopia is a federal republic. The president is chief of state and is elected by the House of People's Representatives for a six-year term. The prime minister serves as the head of government and is selected by the party in power following legislative elections. The legislature consists of the bicameral Parliament. The 108 members of the House of Federation are chosen by state assemblies to serve five-year terms, and the 547 members of the House of People's Representatives are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms.

## Climate

Ethiopia has a tropical monsoon climate. The interior plateaus, usually above 2,400 meters in elevation, experience warmer days and cold nights. During most months, frost forms at night and snow falls in the mountains. The hot zone consists of areas of low elevation which are very hot year round and humid in the tropical valleys and near the seacoast. The region

of Ethiopia closest to the seacoast experiences a monsoon season with heavy rains from June to September.

### **Environmental Concerns**

Current environmental concerns in Ethiopia include deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification. The country experiences water shortages in some areas due to water-intensive farming and inefficient water management techniques.

### **History**

Around the second millennium B.C., the Cushites drove other tribes out of Ethiopia and founded a new civilization. The Cushite civilization most likely traded with the Egyptians, as evidenced by Egyptian texts. The Egyptian name for the Ethiopians was Habashat, from which the name Abyssinia was likely derived.

According to tradition, the first Ethiopian kingdom was founded in the tenth century B.C. by Menelik I, the son the Queen of Sheba was said to have borne to King Solomon of Israel. The first documented Ethiopian kingdom is that of Aksum, a kingdom which probably grew up in the second century A.D. This makes Ethiopia the oldest independent nation in Africa and one of the most ancient in the world.

Traders from Arabia had been settling in northern Ethiopia since 500 B.C. They influenced the developing culture and customs of Ethiopia.

The kingdom of Aksum controlled most of the Red Sea coast and had links with Mediterranean civilizations. Under its King Ezana, Aksum was converted to Christianity in the fourth century A.D. by Frumentius of Tyre. The Ethiopian church was closely tied to the Egyptian Coptic Church, and following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 it accepted monophysitism, which taught that Jesus had only one nature (divine). In the sixth century, Judaism was introduced to Ethiopia, and some Ethiopians converted.

After the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the kingdom of Aksum declined, mostly because its land connections with the Byzantine Empire were cut off and it no longer controlled Red Sea trade routes. After the seventh century, Aksum was concentrated in the center of the Ethiopian Plateau, mainly in the regions of Amhara and Shoa, largely cut off from the outside world. Aksum began to fall apart, and Ethiopia disintegrated into small, competing political units.

In 1530-1531, Ahmad Gran, a Muslim Somali, conquered most of Ethiopia. The Somali War exhausted Ethiopia's resources and ended a period of high cultural development. It also opened the weakened kingdom to invasions by the Oromos. For the next 200 years, the Ethiopian kingdom, based in Gondar, was troubled by civil wars among princes, especially princes of Tigray and Amhara, and aggression by the Oromos.

In the 19th century, Lij Kasa began to reunify Ethiopia. He conquered Amhara, Gojjam, Tigray, and Shoa; in 1855 he was crowned Emperor Tewodros II. Despite opposition from local leaders, he began to centralize and modernize the government and legal systems. Tensions rose between Britain and Ethiopia, and Tewodros imprisoned several British citizens, including the British consul. Angered, the British sent out a military force under the command of Robert Napier. The British easily defeated the Ethiopian forces in 1868, and Tewodros committed suicide rather than face capture.

After Tewodros's suicide, Ethiopia fell into a brief civil war. In 1872, a chieftain of Tigray became Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. He attempted further centralization of the government, but met with strong local resistance. From 1875 to 1876, the Ethiopian empire was threatened by invasions from Egypt. After 1881, the nation had to deal with raids by the Islamic Mahdis from Sudan. In 1889, Emperor Yohannes was killed fighting the Mahdis, and was succeeded by the king of Shoa, who had Italian support. The king of Shoa was crowned Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia.

Shortly after his coronation, Menelik II signed the Treaty of Wuchale, a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Italy. Italy claimed the treaty gave it a protectorate over Ethiopia, and invaded in 1895. Menelik denied the Italian claim, and defeated the Italian forces at Adwa in March of 1896. The October 1896 Treaty of Addis Ababa annulled the Treaty of Wuchale, and Italy recognized Ethiopia's independence but kept its colony in Eritrea.

During his reign, Menelik expanded Ethiopia's borders, adding the provinces of Harar, Sidamo, and Kaffa. He modernized the military and government and promoted economic development. In 1889, he moved the capital of Ethiopia to Addis Ababa. During his rule, the first Ethiopian railroad was built, financed by French interests.

Menelik died in 1913. He was succeeded by his grandson, Lij Iyasu. The new emperor alienated

Ethiopians by favoring Muslims, and angered the British, French, and Italians by supporting the Central Powers in World War I. Lij Iyasu was deposed in 1916, and Menelik's daughter, Zawditu, was made empress, with Ras Tafari Makonnen as regent.

Empress Zawditu gave Ras Tafari additional powers in 1928, and he became emperor upon her death in 1930. Ras Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I.

The new emperor faced an immediate threat from Italian ruler Benito Mussolini, who desired to establish an Italian empire and avenge the 1896 Italian defeat at Adwa. On December 5, 1934, a clash along Ethiopia's border with Italian Somaliland increased tensions. On October 3, 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia. The League of Nations imposed mild sanctions on Italy, and France and Britain tried to broker an agreement giving Italy most of Ethiopia to pacify Mussolini's aggression, but neither was effective. The Italians quickly defeated the Ethiopian army; in May of 1936, Italian forces captured Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie fled, and on June 1, 1936, the king of Italy was crowned emperor of Ethiopia. Ethiopia was combined with Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to form the new country of Italian East Africa.

In 1941, British and South African forces drove the Italians from Ethiopia, and Haile Selassie returned to the throne. Britain continued to exert influence over Ethiopian affairs throughout World War II. In 1945, Ethiopia joined the United Nations as a charter member. Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952, giving Ethiopia direct access to seaports.

Ethiopia received aid from the U.S. and other countries, but wealth continued to be unevenly distributed. Between 1961 and 1967, border clashes between Ethiopia and Eritrea intensified, and from the late '60s through the early '70s the Ethiopian government fought Eritrean secessionist guerrillas.

In February 1974, military officers instituted a coup which gradually forced Haile Selassie from power by September. The new military government suspended the constitution, dismissed the parliament, and placed Lieutenant General Aman Michael Andom at the head of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC).

In 1977, Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam took over the PMAC and instituted a shift away from the original socialist plan. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party formed and began a campaign of

urban guerrilla warfare against the PMAC. During Mengistu's rule, thousands of political opponents were repressed and property was confiscated. In 1977, Somalia invaded disputed territory in the Ogaden Desert and Bale Province. At the same time, Eritrean secessionists gained control of most of Eritrea. By 1978, Ethiopian troops drove the Somali forces out of the country and retook land in Eritrea with the help of aid from the Soviet Union and troops from Cuba.

Throughout the 1980s, severe droughts led to a devastating famine. Thousands of Ethiopians fled the country to Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. In 1988, Somalia and Ethiopia signed a peace treaty, but warring within the country increased as Eritrea and the province of Tigray fought bitterly against the central government.

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of mostly Tigrayan rebels led by Meles Zenawi, defeated the Ethiopian army, forcing Mengistu to resign and flee Ethiopia. The EPRDF organized its own provisional government with Meles in charge. Eritrea became an independent nation in 1993. A new constitution, approved in 1994, divided the country into ethnically-based regions, each of which retained the right of secession.

In 1996, around 70 figures of the Mengistu regime were placed on trial, accused of genocide and crimes against humanity. Many, including Mengistu himself, were tried in absentia.

A vicious border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out in 1998 after Eritrean forces occupied a section of disputed territory. Many thousands were killed on both sides, with neither side gaining an advantage until May 2000. Ethiopian forces launched an offensive, forced the Eritreans out of the disputed territory, and even pushed into Eritrea proper. A cease-fire agreement signed in June of 2000 called for a 15.5-mile-wide buffer zone between the two nations, which would be patrolled by United Nations peacekeeping troops, and a demarcation of the legal border by a neutral party. The border was established in 2002 by the Hague Tribunal, and did not heavily favor either country. Some areas of the border which favored Eritrea led Ethiopia to refuse to finalize the border.

Ethiopia continued to face overwhelming problems of drought, famine, and poverty. A drought from 2000 to 2001 affected around ten million Ethiopians, and another famine in 2003 caused further starvation.

Parliamentary elections in 2005 led to accusations of election irregularities when both the opposition party and the current government suspected each other of unfair play. Opposition protests occurred in the capital in June despite a ban on demonstrations; a number of demonstrators were killed and several thousand were arrested. The unrest began to spread across the country. Election board officials awarded Meles' incumbent government a majority. Opposition street protests in September ended with police killing 200 demonstrators and arresting hundreds more. Most were eventually released, but the government continued to hold opposition leaders; some were charged with treason and genocide. In response, many international organizations suspended all aid to Ethiopia. In April 2007, the government dropped the genocide and treason charges, but continued to hold more than 80 opposition leaders.

In 2005, tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea heightened as both nations built up troops along the still-disputed border. The U.N. called for both countries to reduce the number of troops along the border, and threatened sanctions for noncompliance. In 2006, the boundary commission said it would draw the border on paper, and would give Ethiopia and Eritrea a year to agree upon the exact boundaries on land.

In April of 2006, Ethiopian soldiers clashed with Kenyan forces when Ethiopian soldiers pursued Oromo rebels across the Kenyan border. In July 2006, there were reports of Ethiopian troops entering Somalia to support the besieged Somali government against Islamist rebels. When fighting broke out, a combined force of Somalis and Ethiopians forced the Islamists from their southern Somali strongholds. Open warfare ended in 2007, but clashes with insurgents continued.

Flooding from August through September of 2007, and again in October, affected several hundred thousand Ethiopians.

### **Ethnic Groups**

There are more than 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia, some with as few as 10,000 members. The six largest ethnic groups are the Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Somali, Gurage, and Sidama.

The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, at around 32.1 percent of the population. Their native language is Oromo, which belongs to the Cushite family of languages. The Oromo are divided into 16 subgroups. Historically, they used the *gadaa* system of government, where laws and rulers were

reestablished every eight years. The *gadaa* system is no longer practiced, but remains influential in Oromo thinking. Oromos practice a variety of religions, including Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, and some traditional beliefs.

The Amhara are Ethiopia's second-largest ethnic group. They inhabit the highlands of central Ethiopia, and speak Amharic. Amharic is the working language of the federal authorities in Ethiopia, and the Amhara are influential in the country's economic and political life. Around 90 percent of Amhara are rural and make their living by farming. Marriages are often arranged, with girls often marrying as young as 18 (the minimum age was raised from 14 in the 20th century). Christianity predominates among the Amhara; many belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There are small percentages of Muslim and Protestant Amharas.

The Tigray are the third-largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. They live in Eritrea and in the Tigray province of Ethiopia. Their language is called Tigrinya. Many Tigray belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which plays a large part in daily life. There are also Tigray who follow Islam or Judaism. Many Tigray lead a rural lifestyle, plowing fields with oxen and keeping camels, sheep, and donkeys. Most Tigray families are self-sufficient, providing all their own food. Marriage is monogamous and is often arranged.

Around 5.9 percent of Ethiopia's population is comprised of ethnic Somalis. Their language is known as Somali and is a member of the Cushitic language family. Somalis are split into many clans and sub-clans. Clan loyalty often runs strong. The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims.

The Gurage comprise 4.3 percent of Ethiopia's population. Their homeland is the semi-mountainous region of southwestern Ethiopia, around 150 miles from Addis Ababa. The Gurage people speak a number of languages, all belonging to the Ethiopian Semitic language family. Collectively, Ethiopians often refer to these languages as Guraginya. Around half of the Gurage belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and 40 percent are adherents of Islam. The Gurage are mainly agriculturalists; their main crop is ensete, a plant in the banana family whose large roots are edible.

Around 3.5 percent of Ethiopians belong to the Sidama tribe. They live in southern Ethiopia, in the Sidama Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region. Their language is known as

Sidaamu-afoo. Many Sidama still follow their traditional religion, although a small number have converted to Christianity or Islam. Most Sidama are agriculturalists; like the Gurage, their main staple crop is ensete. They also grow coffee, an important cash crop.

### **Religion**

Most Ethiopian Christians are Ethiopian Orthodox, which accounts for up to half the Ethiopian population. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is part of the Oriental Orthodox Church. It was closely aligned with the Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox Church until it was granted its own patriarchate in 1959 by the Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria.

Islam first came to Ethiopia in 615 A.D., when the ruler of Ethiopia received refugees from Mecca who were fleeing persecution; those Muslims returned to Arabia after a few years. During the subsequent centuries, Muslims arrived peacefully along the Red Sea coast and gradually moved inland to the south and east of Ethiopia through trade and intermarriage. Relations between independent Muslim kingdoms and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia were often tense. During the 19th century, most of these Muslims were incorporated into Ethiopia's expanded territory. Today, all Ethiopian Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, although many also have formal or informal attachments to Sufi mystic practices.

The term *Pentay* is used by many Ethiopians to describe Ethiopian Christians who are not part of either the Orthodox or Catholic churches. The term is an abbreviation of the word Pentecostal, and is used to refer to all Ethiopian Protestants. Large Protestant denominations in Ethiopia include the Kale Heywet (Word of Life), the Mekane Yesus (Place of Jesus) or Lutheran, Mulu Wongel (Full Gospel), and Meserete Kristos (Christ foundation) or Mennonite. Most major Protestant denominations will exchange pastors across denominational lines.

### **Culture**

**Food**—*Injera*, an unleavened bread made from teff grain, is an Ethiopian staple. Food is usually eaten with the hands, and bite-size pieces of injera are used to scoop up stew. Stew, or *wat*, is made of vegetables such as carrots, cabbage, spinach, potatoes, and lentils. A common spice in Ethiopian dishes is *berberey*, which has a red pepper base. Many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians follow the food restrictions of the Old Testament, avoiding the meat of animals with uncloven

hooves or who do not chew their cud. Neither Ethiopian Orthodox Christians nor Muslims eat pork. The coffee ceremony is a very common ritual. During a coffee ceremony, green coffee beans are roasted, then ground and brewed in a traditional black pot called a *jebena*.

**Social status**—There were traditionally four major social groups in Ethiopia, but today social status is much more dynamic, especially in urban areas. In urban society, one's job often determines social status; some jobs are considered "higher-class" than others. In rural areas, the amount of grain and cattle one possesses is an indicator of social status. In urban areas, one's level of education, type of job, and neighborhood are social indicators.

**Marriage**—Marriage practices vary by ethnic group. Traditionally, most marriages were arranged, but arranged marriage is becoming less common, especially in urban areas. It is common for the groom's family to present the bride's family with a dowry, which may include cattle, money, or other items.

**Education**—Children start school at the age of five. In rural areas, schools are few and children are needed to help on farms, so few rural children get the opportunity to go to school. The Ethiopian government is working to build more schools that are accessible to rural children. Children who do well in elementary school go on to secondary school. University is free, but admission is very competitive. Students who complete secondary school take a standardized test to gain acceptance into a university. Each department has a quota; only a certain number of students can be accepted to a particular major each year. The criterion is first-year marks; the students with the highest grades at the end of their first year in university get first choice of major.

**Etiquette**—Ethiopians often greet each other with kisses on both cheeks and many verbal greetings. The elderly are treated with the highest respect. It is considered polite to converse during a meal.

### **Dress**

In urban areas, most Ethiopians wear Western clothing on a daily basis. Traditional clothing is reserved for special occasions such as Christmas or weddings. In rural areas, many Ethiopians still wear traditional clothing for everyday wear.

Traditional Ethiopian clothing is made from cloth called *yahager lebs*, or "clothes of the countryside."

This type of cloth is made from cotton woven in long strips, which are then sewn together. Sometimes shiny threads are woven into the fabric for an ornamented look.

Men wear pants and a knee-length shirt, and sometimes a sweater. They often wear knee-high socks. Both men and women wear shawls known as *neTela*. Women's dresses are known as *habesha qemis*, and are usually white with some color above the lower hem. Women often wear gold and silver bracelets and necklaces.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Driving in Ethiopia is fairly safe, although rural roads are often not lit at night. Especially in rural areas, but also in urban areas, drivers may encounter obstacles such as pedestrians or stray animals.

### **Illness/Injury**

Hospitals and clinics are limited in Addis Ababa, and extremely limited in rural areas. Many Ethiopian doctors are well-trained, but most clinics and even the best hospitals struggle with outdated equipment, inadequate facilities, and shortages of supplies and medications.

### **Crime**

Pickpocketing and other petty thefts occur in Addis Ababa and other crowded areas. Visitors should take the same amount of care with personal items that they would in any major city.

### **Safety and Security**

Ethiopia's political situation has been stable since June of 2006. Visitors should avoid traveling near the borders with Eritrea and Somalia, where there are ongoing tensions and hostilities. Since the 1990s, the Ogaden National Liberation Front and government forces have clashed several times in the Somali state of Ethiopia.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

A passport and visa are required to enter Ethiopia. It is possible to obtain a one-month visa at the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa upon arrival in Ethiopia, but obtaining an airport visa may cause delays or confusion. It is quickest to obtain an Ethiopian visa from the Ethiopian embassy or a consulate before traveling. Visitors arriving in Ethiopia should declare household electronics and foreign currency.

For more information concerning visas, contact the Ethiopian Embassy at 3506 International Dr. NW, Washington, D.C. 20008, or online at [www.ethiopianembassy.org](http://www.ethiopianembassy.org).

### **Immunizations**

Yellow fever is endemic in Ethiopia. Under Ethiopian law, all travelers arriving in Ethiopia from a country where yellow fever is endemic must present proof of inoculation. The CDC recommends yellow fever vaccination for all travelers to Ethiopia nine months and older.

Other recommended vaccines include hepatitis A, hepatitis B, typhoid, meningitis, and polio. Consult a travel health professional to determine which vaccines should be obtained.

Malaria is a risk in Ethiopia in all areas at altitudes below 2,000 meters, or 6,500 feet. There is no risk in Addis Ababa. Travelers who will be visiting a malaria-risk area in Ethiopia should take a course of antimalarial drugs before traveling. Chloroquine is not an effective antimalarial drug for Ethiopia.

### **Special Circumstances**

Visitors to Ethiopia should avoid swimming in rivers, lakes, or other bodies of fresh water, since most have been found to contain parasites which cause water-borne illnesses.

Ethiopia has a cash economy. American and Canadian currency and traveler's checks can be exchanged at the airport and some banks. There are no ATMs. Major credit cards are accepted at some larger hotels and travel agencies.

Ethiopian law is very sensitive about photography. Avoid photographing military structures, military or police personnel, industrial facilities, government buildings, and infrastructure such as dams, roads, bridges, and airfields. Travel guides, police, and officials will be able to advise if a particular site may be photographed.

### **Electricity**

Ethiopia uses 220V/50Hz power, so a power converter will be required to use most American appliances in Ethiopia. Most recently-made cell phone chargers and laptop computers are designed to run on various types of power, and will not require a converter. Ethiopia uses plug types D, J, and L, which are all round-pin plugs; a set of plug adapters will be necessary to convert American types A and B (flat-prong) plugs to fit in Ethiopian outlets. Electricity throughout the country is subject to occasional power outages and voltage fluctuation. Voltage stabilizing devices and uninterruptible power supplies (UPS) are available for purchase in most urban areas.

**Telephone/Internet**

Both landline and mobile telephone service is available throughout most of Ethiopia, although both are subject to occasional disruption. Cell phones, SIM cards, and user-minute cards are normally available for purchase. Most SIM cards purchased abroad will not function in Ethiopia. Dial-up internet service is available in much of the country, but it is extremely slow and subject to frequent cuts. Broadband service was recently introduced, but is available only in certain parts of Addis Ababa.