

UNIT 3

Peoples and States in Ethiopia and the Horn to the end of 13th C.

Introduction: Ethiopia and the Horn

Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa are renowned as the cradle of humankind and ancient civilizations. This unit explores the region's linguistic, religious, and settlement diversity up to the 13th century, highlighting the development of states and dynasties that shaped its history.

Key Terms

- **Dynasty:** A sequence of rulers from the same family.
- **Kingdom:** A country, state, or territory ruled by a king or queen.

Languages of Ethiopia and the Horn

The region is marked by extensive linguistic diversity, with over 80 languages and numerous dialects. Languages are classified into two major superfamilies:

Afro-Asiatic Super-Family: This is the most widely spoken language family in Ethiopia, encompassing a large portion of the population.

Nilo-Saharan Super-Family: This superfamily is spoken by groups primarily located in the western and southwestern regions of Ethiopia, especially along the Ethio-Sudanese border.

I. Afro-Asiatic Super-Family:

The Afro-Asiatic super-family is the largest language family in Ethiopia. It can be further divided into three linguistic families: Cushitic, Semitic, and Omotic.

A. Cushitic Language Family:

The Cushitic language family is the most widely spoken in terms of both geographical coverage and the number of speakers. It is subdivided into Northern Cushitic, Central Cushitic, and Eastern Cushitic.

Northern Cushitic: Historically, this language was spoken across a vast area between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. Today, it is represented primarily by the Beja language, spoken in Northwestern Eritrea.

Central Cushitic: This language group spread across ancient times and is represented today by the Bilen language in Eritrea and the Agaw languages (Qimant, Himitagna, and Awign) in Ethiopia.

Eastern Cushitic: This is the largest and most diverse branch of the Cushitic family, further divided into Highland and Lowland East Cushitic.

Lowland Cushitic: Includes languages spoken by groups such as the Oromo, Afar, Somali, Konso, Gidole, Erbore, Dassenech, and Saho. These languages are named "Lowland" because their speakers originally lived in the lowlands of Ethiopia and the Horn.

Highland Cushitic: Includes languages spoken by groups such as the Hadiya, Kambata, Tambaro, Halaba, Sidama, Gedeo, and Burji, who inhabit the highlands of central Ethiopia.

B. Semitic Language Family:

The Semitic languages in Ethiopia are divided into Northern Semitic and Southern Semitic.

Northern Semitic: The ancient language of Ge'ez falls under this category. Ge'ez, once widespread, is now primarily used in religious contexts within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Other languages in this group include Tigrigna, spoken in Tigray and Southern Eritrea, and Tigré, found in Eritrea.

Southern Semitic: This group includes languages such as Amharic, Argobba, Guraghigna, Siltie, Harari, and the now-extinct Gafat language.

C. Omotic Language Family:

Omotic languages are primarily spoken in the Omo River basin, though historically, they extended further north. This language family includes numerous languages spoken by diverse ethnic groups in the region.

Examples of Omotic Language-Speaking Peoples: Ari, Banna, Basketo, Bench, Chara, Dawuro, Dime, Dizi, Dorze, Gamo, Ganza, Gayil, Gofa, Hamer, Hozo, Kachama Ganjule, Karo, Keficho, Konta, Korete, Male, Melo, Nayi, Oyda, Sezo, Shekkacho, Sheko, Wolaita, Yem, and Zayse.

Subdivisions: The Omotic languages can be further classified, with notable groups like the Wolaita and Gamo falling under the Omoto subgroup, and the Keficho people being part of the Gongga subgroup.

II. Nilo-Saharan Super-Family:

The Nilo-Saharan language family is less widespread than the Afro-Asiatic but still significant in Ethiopia, particularly along the western borders.

A. Chari-Nile Family:

This family includes languages spoken by the Anuak, Nuer, Majang, Benishangul, Kunama, Mursi, Surma, and Tirma peoples.

B. Koman Family:

This family includes languages spoken by the Gumuz, Koma, Sese, Ma'o, and Komo peoples. Major Religions of Ethiopia

3.1.2 Major Religions of Ethiopia

1. Indigenous Religion:

- **Definition:** Indigenous religions are belief systems that are native to a particular region or culture and have been practiced by the local people since ancient times.
 - **Origins and Practices:**
 - Emerged with sedentary settlements and agricultural development.
 - Priests played a significant role in rituals such as praying for rainfall, giving thanks, and seeking protection from natural hazards.
 - Farmers paid tributes to priests for their services.
 - Special reverence is given to ancestors, and a Supreme Deity is often worshiped, with special powers attributed to natural phenomena considered sacred.
 - **Example:**
 - **Waqeffanna of the Oromo:**
 - Belief in one Supreme Being, Waqa, with power manifested through spirits called Ayyana.
 - Revered figures like Qallu (male) and Qallitti (female) act as intermediaries between Ayyana and the believers.
 - **Syncretism:** Indigenous religious practices are often fused with Christianity and Islam.
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2. Judaism:

- **Introduction:**
 - Practiced in Ethiopia since ancient times, primarily by the Bete-Israel (House of Israel), descendants of Israelite tribes who migrated to Ethiopia during the Exodus.

- The Bete-Israel were concentrated in northwest Ethiopia before migrating to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s.

- **Practices:**

- Bete-Israel maintained Jewish traditions despite pressure from Christian neighbors.
- Both Judaism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church share similar Old Testament teachings, liturgical languages (Geez), and religious customs, though the Bete-Israel adhered strictly to Judaic rituals.

- **Current Status:**

- Few Jews remain in Ethiopia today, with the majority having emigrated to Israel.
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3. Christianity:

- **Introduction:**

- Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia around 330 AD by Frumentius, who converted King Ezana and his court.
- Became the state religion with royal support, aiding in its expansion.

- **Expansion:**

- Spread further with the arrival of the Nine Saints in the 5th century, leading to the establishment of churches and monasteries, such as the monastery of Debre-Damo.
- Christianity's spread was marked by the translation of the Bible into Ge'ez and the construction of religious centers.

- **Significant Figures:**

- Notable religious leaders like Abba Iyesus Moa, Abba Giyorgis Zegasicha, and Abune Tekle-Haymanot played key roles in spreading Christianity beyond the highlands.

- **Art and Culture:**

- The spread of Christianity was accompanied by the development of Ethiopian art, literature, architecture, and music.

- **Contact with Europe:**

- 15th-century Portuguese explorers opened the way for Catholic influence, leading to conflicts when the Jesuits attempted to convert Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in the 16th-17th centuries.
 - Catholic and Protestant missionaries reentered Ethiopia in the 19th century, establishing schools, translating religious texts, and expanding Christianity further into regions like Wolaita, Hadiya, and Kambata.
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4. Islam:

- **Introduction:**Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 7th century and spread to Ethiopia during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed.In 615 AD, the Prophet sent followers to Aksum for asylum, where they were warmly received by King Armah Ella Seham.
- **Spread:**Islam entered Ethiopia mainly through trade routes and peaceful means.It was introduced through three main gateways: the Red Sea in the north, the Gulf of Aden in the east, and the Indian Ocean in the southeast.Muslim merchants and clerics played a crucial role in spreading Islam, particularly along the trade routes that connected Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula.
- **Establishment of Muslim Sultanates:**

The introduction of Islam led to the formation of Muslim sultanates in the Horn of Africa, which contributed to the cultural and religious diversity of the region.Cities like Harar became significant Islamic cultural centers.

- **Coexistence with Christianity:**Islam and Christianity coexisted in Ethiopia, each contributing to the development and enrichment of Ethiopian culture.Ethiopian Muslims maintained close ties with Islamic centers in Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen through trade, pilgrimage, and religious studies.

3.1 Settlement Patterns

Ethiopia's settlement patterns have been shaped by environmental, socio-economic, and political factors. These include:

- **Density Variation:** Populations vary from dense in highland areas to sparse in lowlands.

- **Historical Movements:** Migration patterns have influenced current settlement distributions, with Cushitic and Semitic-speaking peoples residing between the Red Sea and the Blue Nile, and Omotic and Nilotic groups in the southwest and west.

Historical States and Dynasties

3.2 Pre-Aksumite States

Punt: An ancient state in the Horn of Africa, with an unclear exact location but believed to include parts of modern-day Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Known for trade with Egypt since the third millennium BC, supplying goods like gold, ivory, myrrh, and animal skins in exchange for Egyptian goods.

Yeha: Located 30 km northeast of Aksum, it is one of the oldest centers, dating back to around 1000 BC, with its peak between 750 and 500 BC. Notable for its well-preserved stone masonry and inscriptions.

Hawulti Melazo: Situated southeast of Aksum, known for inscribed stone tablets that have been excavated.

Damat: Preceded the rise of Aksum, with its center located south of Aksum. Had relations with South Arabia, using the Red Sea port of Adulis for trade.

3.3 Aksumite Kingdom

- **Emergence:** Aksum emerged in the first century AD, centered in Aksum city, and expanded from the Red Sea to the River Abay.

- **Economy and Culture:** Aksum relied on agriculture and trade through Adulis. The kingdom minted coins and developed the Ge'ez language. It adopted Christianity in the 4th century.

- **Decline:** Aksum declined due to the loss of the Red Sea trade, internal rebellions, and external pressures, eventually retreating southward by the 9th century.

3.4 Zagwe Dynasty

- **Origins:** The Zagwe dynasty, founded around 1150 AD by Mera Tekle Haymnot, originated from the Agaw ruling class in Lasta, part of the former Aksumite Empire.
- **Capital:** The capital was established at Adefa (Roha), later known as Lalibela.
- **Economy:** The dynasty's economy was primarily agricultural, with additional income from trade through the Zeila port and the Dahlak Islands.

Achievements

- **Architecture:** The Zagwe dynasty is renowned for the construction of the eleven monolithic rock-hewn churches in Lalibela during the reign of Emperor Lalibela in the 13th century.

Decline

- **Succession Issues:** Internal conflicts over succession among the Zagwe princes weakened the dynasty.
- **Opposition:** Strong opposition from the Tigray and Amhara regions, particularly due to claims that the Zagwe kings were illegitimate successors to the Aksumite throne.
- **Overthrow:** The Amhara chief Yekuno Amlak led a movement against the Zagwe, defeating the last Zagwe king, Yetbarek, in 1270 AD. Yekuno Amlak declared himself Emperor and established the Solomonic dynasty, claiming descent from the last Aksumite king.

Legacy

- **Cultural Impact:** The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela remain a significant part of Ethiopia's cultural and religious heritage, making Lalibela a center of Christian learning and culture.

3.5 Sultanate of Shewa

- **Emergence:** The Sultanate of Shewa was established in 896 AD, following the introduction of Islam to the Horn of Africa. It was founded by the Makhzunmite clan from southern Arabia.
- **Location:** Situated in the hot lowlands on the left of the Awash River, Shewa became a key player in regional trade, particularly along the trade routes connecting the port of Zeila with the Ethiopian interior.
- **Decline:** The sultanate faced internal power struggles, leading to its eventual decline.

Rise of Ifat

- **Formation:** The Sultanate of Ifat, founded by Umar Walasma in 1285 AD, emerged to the south of Shewa.
- **Dominance:** Ifat became the strongest Muslim state in the region, controlling the profitable Zeila trade routes, and became a significant rival to the Christian highland kingdom.
- **Conflict:** The competition for control over Zeila's trade routes led to ongoing conflicts between Ifat and the Christian highland state.