

UNIT THREE

PEOPLES, STATES AND HISTORICAL PROCESSES IN ETHIOPIA AND THE HORN TO THE END OF THE 13TH CENTURY

Ethiopia: A Mosaic of Culture and History

Geographic Context

Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, is bordered by Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. This region is often regarded as the "cradle of humankind" due to its significant archaeological findings. One of the most notable discoveries is the fossil of a hominid named "Lucy" (or "Dinqnesh" in Amharic), found in Hadar, Afar lowlands, dating back 3.18 million years. This discovery supports the theory that early humans first appeared in this area.

Cultural and Historical Significance

Ethiopia is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and ancient civilization. The nation is a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups, languages, religions, and traditions, earning it the description "a mosaic of people." Despite this diversity, Ethiopians share common values such as patriotism, respect for elders, and hospitality.

Key Terms and Concepts

- **Civilization:** The complex society with established cities, organized governments, and cultural developments.
- **Cradle:** Refers to the origin or early development of something—in this case, early humans.
- **State:** A political entity with defined territories and governance structures.
- **Christianity:** A monotheistic religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.
- **Obelisk:** A tall, four-sided, narrow tapering monument with a pyramidion on top, often associated with ancient cultures.
- **Rock-hewn:** Carved out of rock, often referring to ancient structures or religious sites.
- **Culture:** The social behavior and norms found in human societies.
- **Solomonic:** Pertaining to the Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopia.
- **Inscription:** Text carved or engraved into a surface.
- **Islam:** A monotheistic religion founded by Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century.
- **Stele:** An upright stone slab or column with inscriptions or carvings.
- **Zagwe:** A dynasty that ruled Ethiopia from the 9th to 13th centuries.

Languages and Religions

Languages of Ethiopia and the Horn

Ethiopia is home to about 85 languages, reflecting its rich linguistic diversity. These languages belong to four major language families:

1. **Afro-Asiatic:** Includes Cushitic, Omotic, Semitic, Berber, Chadic, and ancient Egyptian languages.
 - **Cushitic:** Spoken by many in Ethiopia, with branches such as North Cushitic, Central Cushitic, East Cushitic, and Southern Cushitic.
 - **Omotic:** Predominantly spoken in the Omo Valley.
 - **Semitic:** Includes languages like Amharic, Tigrigna, and Ge'ez.
2. **Nilo-Saharan:** Spoken by communities in Beni-Shangul Gumuz and Gambella. Examples include Anuak and Nuer.
3. **Niger-Congo:** Not primarily spoken in Ethiopia but present in parts of East Africa.
4. **Khoisan:** Primarily found outside Ethiopia, in Southern Africa.

Major Religions of Ethiopia

Ethiopia's religious landscape is diverse, encompassing both indigenous and introduced religions:

- **Indigenous Religions:** These are traditional belief systems, such as the Oromo religion focusing on Waqa (the Creator) and the Hadiya belief in Waa.
- **Judaism:** Introduced around the 8th century B.C., with historical ties to the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.
- **Christianity:** Arrived in the 4th century A.D., initially introduced to the royal court. Key figures include Frumentius, who was instrumental in the conversion of King Ezana and the establishment of Christianity in Ethiopia.
- **Islam:** Entered Ethiopia in the 7th century A.D. peacefully, through early Muslim refugees and later spread via coastal trade routes.

Settlement of Peoples of the Region

Settlement Patterns

Settlement patterns refer to the distribution of people across a landscape, shaped by a combination of historical, environmental, socio-economic, and political processes. These patterns can vary greatly, with some areas densely populated while others are sparsely settled. The historical movement and

settlement of different peoples in the region have been influenced by various factors, including geography and socio-political changes.

Historical Settlement

1. **Cushitic and Semitic Peoples:** The Cushitic and Semitic peoples originally settled in the area between the Red Sea and the Blue Nile. Over time, they expanded into various regions of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, including Northern, North-Central, North-Eastern, South-Central, and Eastern Ethiopia.
2. **Omotic Peoples:** Most Omotic peoples have settled in southwestern Ethiopia, particularly along the Omo River basin. Notable exceptions are the Shinasha in Benishangul-Gumuz and the South Mao in Wallagaa.
3. **Nilotes:** The Nilotes primarily inhabit the area along the Ethio-Sudanese border, with some groups extending into the southern Omo region.

Pre-Aksumite States and their Geographical Setting

Punt

- **Overview:** Punt was an early state in the Horn of Africa known from Egyptian records. It was a significant trading partner of ancient Egypt, with Egyptian expeditions to Punt documented in detail.
- **Trade Goods:** Punt exported myrrh, incense, ebony, ivory, and exotic animals to Egypt, while importing items like axes and jewelry.
- **Location:** The exact location of Punt is debated, with possibilities ranging from northern or northeastern Somalia to northern Ethiopia.

Da'amat

- **Timeframe:** Da'amat existed from 980 B.C. to 400 B.C., located south of Aksum.
- **Capital:** Yeha was the capital, known for its commercial activities and trade with South Arabia.
- **Trade:** Da'amat was a major trade hub for ivory, rhinoceros horn, and other goods. It had significant contact with South Arabian merchants and was important for its iron tools and millet cultivation.
- **Legacy:** The Kingdom of Da'amat laid the groundwork for the Aksumite Empire, influencing its cultural and technological advancements.

The Aksumite Kingdom

Expansion and Trade

- **Formation:** The Aksumite state began around 200-100 B.C. and expanded to include extensive territories.
- **Major Port:** Adulis was a key port, facilitating trade with regions as far as Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Asia Minor (Turkey).
- **Exports:** Aksum exported ivory, myrrh, gold, spices, and other goods.
- **Imports:** Manufactured products from Egypt, India, and the Roman Empire were imported.

Economic and Cultural Achievements

- **Currency:** Aksum minted gold, silver, and bronze coins for trade.
- **Architecture:** Known for its monumental steles and advanced architectural techniques, including the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.
- **Writing System:** Development of the Ge'ez script from the Sabeian alphabet, which contributed to Ethiopia's literary and historical documentation.
- **Calendar:** The Ethiopic calendar, with 12 months of 30 days plus additional days, is still in use today.

Decline

- **Challenges:** The decline began in the late 7th century due to environmental degradation, reduced agricultural productivity, and external pressures, including the rise of Arab Muslim powers.
- **Collapse:** The destruction of Adulis and internal rebellions led to the eventual collapse of the Aksumite state.

The Sultanate of Shewa

Overview

- **Location:** The Sultanate of Shewa covered parts of present-day northeastern Shewa and northern Hararghe.
- **Rulers:** The Makhzumite dynasty ruled from around 896 A.D. until 1285 A.D. when it was overthrown by the Walasma dynasty of Ifat.
- **Conflicts:** The sultanate frequently faced conflicts with neighboring states, including the Kingdom of Damot.

The Zagwe Dynasty

Formation and Achievements

- **Foundation:** Established in the mid-12th century by Mera Tekle Haymanot, who overthrew the last Aksumite king.
- **Capital:** The Zagwe Dynasty centered in Lalibela, known for its rock-hewn churches.
- **Cultural Contributions:** Significant for the construction of monolithic churches and the translation of religious texts into Ge'ez.
- **Decline:** The Zagwe Dynasty ended due to internal succession problems and opposition from groups claiming descent from the Aksumite kings.

The Kingdom of Damot

Overview

- **Location:** Located south of the Blue Nile River, Damot was a powerful state that interacted with both Muslim and Christian states.
- **Conquests:** It extended its influence over various territories, including the Sultanate of Shewa.
- **Decline:** The kingdom was eventually subdued by King Amda Tsiyon of the Solomonic dynasty in the 14th century. Later, pressure from Oromo attacks led to the migration of some Damot people to southern Gojjam.

The Bete-Israel (Ethiopian Jews)

The Bete-Israel, also known as Ethiopian Jews, were historically one of the marginalized occupational castes in Ethiopia. This group, traditionally engaged in occupations considered lowly by the broader community—such as pottery, blacksmithing, and leatherworking—lived in areas like Wogera, Quara, Tegede, Welqayt, and Simen.

Historical Context and Conflicts

The Bete-Israel faced significant tensions with the Christian Highland Kingdom. During the period between 1413 and 1478, the relationship deteriorated from gradual encroachment to full-scale conflicts, driven by the emperors' increasing pressure. A pivotal conflict occurred around 1413, when King Yishaq defeated them in Wogera. After their defeat, the Bete-Israel were compelled to convert to Christianity, with King Yishaq proclaiming that only baptized individuals could inherit land, while non-converts would be exiled—a term that likely led to the name "Felasha."

Economic and Social Adaptations

To survive, the Bete-Israel adapted economically by developing handicrafts, including blacksmithing, partly in response to King Yishaq's desire to enhance the Christian army's weaponry. They continued to maintain their religious and social identity while integrating into the local economy. From the reign of Zera Ya'iqob (1434-1468), a group of Bete-Israel blacksmiths traveled with the royal court. By 1540, they had expanded their crafts to include building, with remnants of their work found in Guzara, Gorgora, and Azezo.

Religious Influence and Independence

The Bete-Israel preserved a high degree of religious integrity and social isolation, contributing significantly to Ethiopian Orthodox practices. They influenced Ethiopian Orthodoxy through customs such as the Saturday Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary rules. Despite their efforts to maintain independence by supporting various rebellions and pretenders to the throne, they were eventually subdued by King Suseneyos and lost their autonomy.

Summary

The Bete-Israel were a unique and resilient community that adapted to significant challenges while maintaining their religious and cultural identity. Their history reflects broader themes of marginalization, adaptation, and resistance in Ethiopian history.