The Peoples of Ethiopia

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THE PEOPLES OF ETHIOPIA

By Robert Gale Woolbert

CARLO CONTIROSSINI, the greatest living authority on Ethiopian culture and history, has described Ethiopia as a "museum of peoples." For thousands of years diverse peoples have beaten against the ramparts of the Ethiopian highland. Some have passed on, but others have remained to form the ethnographic mosaic that is the empire of Haile Selassie.

There are numerous difficulties confronting us when we attempt to classify these peoples. In the first place our information is very meagre. There are large areas in Ethiopia where trained anthropologists have never penetrated. The little that they know has led them to disagree among themselves. The layman can consequently be forgiven for being bewildered. Another complication is the fact that some of the peoples are still on the move. This factor, added to the existing high degree of racial and tribal intermixture, only makes confusion worse confounded.

Nevertheless, in spite of these very grave handicaps, it is possible to draw up a rough classification of the peoples of Ethiopia. In doing so care must be taken not to place much reliance on racial distinctions. Race is wholly a physical concept. One's race is determined by the color of the skin, the shape of the nose and lips, the flatness of the hair, the cephalic index, etc. Race has no necessary connection with cultural or geographical or political phenomena.

Racially the Ethiopians are a mixture of white and black, with the emphasis distinctly on the former. True, some students maintain that there is such a thing as an Ethiopian race inhabiting most of Africa east of the Nile between Upper Egypt and Tanganyika. Others hold that there is a Hamitic race to which belong most of the inhabitants of north and northeast Africa. The existence of any such race is denied by most anthropologists. There is, however, a Hamitic group of languages, of which more will be said shortly. This confusion of race with language is one of the commonest errors into which pseudo-scientists can fall. The Nazi notion that there is an Aryan race is a case in point.

Language forms the most convenient criterion for the classification of peoples, whether civilized or not. Of course, language does not tell the whole story, but since it is the basic cohesive force in tribal and national cultures, it can safely be adopted as the best indication of those divisions which the people themselves recognize as paramount. Geographical, historical, political and religious factors modify but do not destroy the usefulness of this general rule.

The Hamitic languages once prevailed throughout north and northeast Africa. Within historic times, however, successive waves of Semitic-speaking peoples have swept over these regions until the Hamitic languages have become largely submerged. This process has not gone as far in northeast as in north Africa. In Ethiopia, for instance, the majority of the population still speaks a Hamitic tongue. Even the Semitic language of the Christian ruling people on the central plateau, whom for purposes of convenience we shall call the Abyssinians, contains many Hamitic elements.
Though estimates concerning the population of Ethiopia are notoriously unreliable, it is probable that about one-third of the empire speaks a Semitic language. With the exception of the Sudanese-Arabic prevailing in a small area at the northwestern corner of the country, the Semitic languages of Ethiopia are descendants of the ancient Ge'ez. Ge'ez has not been spoken for a thousand years but, like Latin, it is retained as the language of the church, in this case the Ethiopian Coptic.

From the Ge'ez have descended the modern Tigré, Tigray and Amharic. Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia. In its alphabet there are thirty-seven consonants. With four exceptions each of these has seven forms, depending upon which vowel sound follows it. There are in all two hundred and fifty-one different characters in the language. There have been efforts in recent years to found a modern Amharic literature, but with disappointing results. The great mass of the Abyssinians are completely illiterate, and in addition to the government officials the only class capable of reading is the clergy, whose interests are largely confined to the liturgical texts in the ancient Ge'ez. The use
of Amharic, due to its official position, is becoming increasingly widespread.

In Ethiopia north of the Takkaze River and Lake Ashanghi (in other
words, in the province of Tigré) and in south-central Eritrea, Tigray, another
offspring of Ge’ez, is spoken. This linguistic difference between the province
of Tigré and the rest of Christian Ethiopia only accentuates the lack of harmony
between the two. The Tigreans feel that they and not the Amharas or the
Shoans should rule the empire. Is not Aksum, the ancient capital and holy city
of Ethiopia, in Tigré?

In northeastern Eritrea and in the Dahlak Islands the natives speak an-
other derivation of Ge’ez, Tigré (not to be confused with the name of the prov-
ince of Tigré). Like Tigray it is without a written literature. As one would
expect, it shows many Arabic influences. However, unlike those who speak
Tigray and Amharic, those who speak Tigré are largely Mohammedanized.

So much for the Semitic languages. Let us now turn to those belonging to
the Hamitic group, taking up first the Danakil. There are perhaps not more
than 100,000 Danakil. In spite of their small number they are important, for
they occupy the inferno in northeastern Ethiopia and southeastern Eritrea
known as the Danakil Depression. This area is one of the most inhospitable
on earth. It is a mass of sand, boulders, and lava. There is practically no vegeta-
tion except along the banks of the Hawash River, which never reaches the sea,
but disappears into the desert behind Assab. The Danakil live a very pre-
carious and primitive existence. Their main livelihood is the pasturing of a few
heat-resistant animals, and robbery. This latter profession they practise at the
expense of each other as well as of other peoples. The Danakil recognize no
central overlord, but are divided into several tribes or sultanates of which
that of Aussa is the most important. The predatory activities of the Danakil
are the result not only of their ungrateful environment but of the hostile be-
havior of surrounding peoples, for they have long been the object of slave
raids by Abyssinians from the plateau. The principal protection of the Danakil
has been their capacity to live under environmental conditions such as no
highland dweller could possibly withstand.

The Danakil are Mohammedans and consequently have an additional
reason for hating the Abyssinians. Menelik established a shadowy suzerainty
over the Aussa sultanate in the last part of the nineteenth century. Since there
is no love lost between the Abyssinians and the Danakil, it is not surprising
that some of the latter have fought for the Italians.

Due to their proximity to Arabia, the language and culture of the Danakil
show many traces of Arabian influence. The same may be said for the numerous
tribes speaking Somali who inhabit the Horn of Africa. These people present
distinct physical characteristics. That the Somali culture in many respects
resembles that of the southern Arabs is natural, inasmuch as they inhabit a
country not unlike southern Arabia and since their contact with southern
Arabia has been long and close. The numerous Somali tribes are split up arbi-
trarily among four empires: British, French, Italian and Ethiopian. In all they
probably number two million souls. The Somali are on the whole nomadic but
are not as primitive and savage as the Danakil, though they are great fighters
— as the Mad Mullah for many years demonstrated in his war on both Italy
and Britain. The territory they inhabit lends itself to pasturage and occa-
tionally to the cultivation of cereals, though community life and commerce are not unknown. The Somali are all Mohammedans.

The most numerous Hamitic-speaking people are the Gallas. As will be seen from the first map, the Gallas live in central and south-central Ethiopia. In general they are brown skinned, with wavy (not woolly) hair, and fine noses. Some of them have assumed certain negroid physical characteristics as a result of contact with negro tribes to the south and southwest. Galla social and cul-

![Religions of Ethiopia Map]

tural evolution has reached a higher stage than that of the Somali. The regions inhabited by the Gallas are on the whole fertile and well watered, and are well suited for the raising of cattle and horses and for primitive agriculture.

The Gallas are famous horsemen. Beginning in the sixteenth century their cavalry made repeated incursions into the central highland until it appeared that they might completely overwhelm Christian Abyssinia. The Amharic-speaking people eventually succeeded in preserving their political independence, though culturally and physically the Gallas made heavy gains in the southern part of the central plateau. The Galla language now extends well into

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the heart of the Abyssinian highland. It has, in fact, reached so far north that it has completely isolated the Amharic-speaking Shoans from the main body of the Abyssinians to the north. Even in Shoa, the political centre of the empire since the time of Menelik, the Galla language is spoken by a large part of the population. The imperial administration and the army have thus come to contain important Galla elements which, though perhaps speaking Amharic in public, nevertheless use Galla among themselves. There has been a tendency among the northern Gallars to adopt Christianity at least superficially. Others have embraced Islam. Most of them, above all those in the south, still adhere to their pagan cults. This lack of religious unity serves to emphasize the great diversity which obtains between the numerous Galla tribes, making generalizations about them as a whole unsafe.

Among the less important Hamitic languages spoken in Ethiopia should be mentioned Sidama and Agau. Sidama is spoken by several primitive tribes in southwest Ethiopia where they have naturally been much influenced by the Negroes. There are about a quarter million persons who speak Sidama.

The reader will notice on the map that there are two islands of Hamitic speech in northern Ethiopia. This is all that remains of the Agau language which prevailed throughout Ethiopia before it was submerged by a Semitic invasion from the north and east. Other remnants of the ancient Hamitic languages may be found in Eritrea, such as Saho, Beja, etc.

This concludes our survey of the languages of Ethiopia except for those used by the Nilotic group along the western frontier. These negroid peoples in every respect except politically belong to the upper Sudan. The Abyssinian ruling class has never taken any interest in these lowland dwellers other than to hunt slaves among them. Of all the groups in the Ethiopian empire they have probably been the least assimilated. With few exceptions they are pagans.

We have not covered all the languages spoken in Ethiopia; some of them have as yet received little scientific study and can not be definitely classified.

Enough has been said, however, to show that though Ethiopia is an empire she is not a nation. This, of course, is the distinction upon which Mussolini bases his Ethiopian claims. He frankly proposes to supplant Ethiopian imperialism in the non-Amharic parts of Ethiopia with Italian imperialism. The Abyssinian ruling class, he declares, has plainly demonstrated its incapacity to govern its subject peoples in an enlightened manner. It therefore becomes not only Italy's right but her duty to civilize these "backward areas".

It must be admitted that no such thing as an Ethiopian national sentiment pervades the congeries of peoples inhabiting Haile Selassie's empire. A vigorous nationalism can exist only where there is a common cultural tradition. But how can there be an Ethiopian cultural tradition common to illiterate peoples using diverse languages, only a few of which have been reduced to writing, and in none of which is there a written literature worthy of the name? Nor is there in Ethiopia the cohesive force of a common religion. It is dubious whether even a successful war waged against a common foe would do much toward knitting the empire together spiritually.

Consequently we can assume that the non-Amharic parts of Ethiopia must long remain subject to imperialist exploitation, be it Abyssinian or Italian.