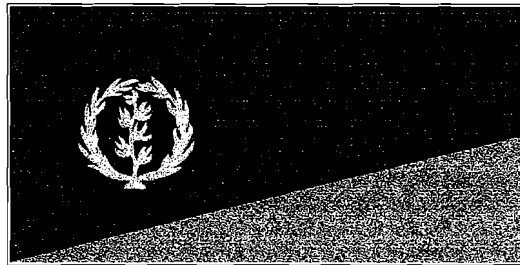


# TIGRINA

red  
gold



green  
sky blue



Eritrea



# TIGRINYA SCRIPT



from leather wall hanging



# TIGRINYA

ጉግርታ

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of both Ethiopia and Eritrea is closely linked. Eritrea, as do her neighbours, has laid claim to being the site of the Land of Punt, an area which the Egyptian pharaohs were known to praise in 2900 BCE. It is also known as the Land of the Gods, as it traded in items such as gold and frankincense, as well as ebony, ivory and slaves. The very first settlements in the general area were believed to have taken place in the Barka Valley in 8000 BCE. It is believed that these settlements were related to those of the Central-African pygmies with which there has been much intermingling.

The Tigray-Tigrinya people are descendants of early Semitic people who originally settled in the Horn of Africa about 1000 BCE from Hadramaut (South Yemen). They are descended from the Sabaeans (Shebar). According to their traditions, they trace their roots to Menelik I, son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Menelik I's Solomonic line of rulers of Ethiopia ended with the deposing of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.

By about 1500 BCE, the Sabaeen civilization became the Axum Empire, based on a mixture of the early Sabaeen culture and the prior Cushitic culture. The area where they lived in the mountains was the centre of the ancient Cushite empire of Axum. It is thought that the Sabaeans began to settle on the west coast of the Red Sea, from their home in southern Arabia, about 1000 BCE. The ruins of the ancient city of Axu still stand in the Tigray Province.

The Sabaeans were referred to in the Qu'ran as "*People of the Book*." The Tigray-Tigrinya were also associated with the Amhara in the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia, called in Tigrinya, **Etiopia**. The name Abyssinia comes from an earlier name of **Habash**, an early group of the Sabaeen settlers who became the Tigrinya.

They founded the Aksunite empire in 400 BCE, and it lasted until 600 CE. After this time, there was a period of occupation. Ethiopia gave Eritrea a governor in 950 CE, and then the area was seized by the Ottoman Turks in 1557. In 1846, it was transferred to Egyptian control under the Coptic Church. The port was then "*bought*" by the Italians in 1882. The Italian colony of **Mare Erythraeum** (*Red Sea*) came into being in 1890. Asmara was made the capital.

In 1941, Eritrea was liberated. In 1952, the United Nations made it an autonomous state, federated with Ethiopia. In 1962, it was annexed by Ethiopia. It was the famine-stricken Tigray that raised international consciousness in 1985. Yet, the Tigray themselves received almost no aid as the government was trying to break the will of the independent Tigray, and so they kept relief workers out of their region.

A struggle for independence continued until at last, the capital city, Asmara, was liberated in 1992, with Eritrea following in May, 1993.

A year later, Eritrea's recovery was hailed as being miraculous. It is presently seen as a safe and clean country where all groups have united towards a common goal, rebuilding the country. Israel and the United States, who originally backed Ethiopia against the Eritrean "rebels", are now offering aid in the form of agricultural and hydrology training, books for libraries and military assistance. The United States asked Eritrean president, Isias Afwerki, to mediate the civil war in Somalia. Laboratories, pharmaceutical plants, radar bases and bases for oil exploration have been set up. The government has encouraged investors to set up in the outer regions of Eritrea, instead of only in the capital city. Education and health are still areas of grave concern for the fledgling country. One United States aid official commented that "Eritrea is the one place where you feel the most comfortable, that every nickel you put into is going to be used properly... They are on a take-off here. All they need is a little bit of wind".

The predominant religions of Eritrea are Muslim (50 percent) and Christian (50 percent Catholic/Greek Orthodox).

The Tigrinya of Eritrea are the same cultural and linguistic group as the Tigray of the Tigray Province of Ethiopia. The Tigrinya are one of Eritrea's nine diverse people groups, each with its own distinct customs and language.

## LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Tigrinya is the mother tongue of 3,224,875 speakers, 146,933 second language speakers, 3,284,568 within ethnic groups, and 2,819,755 monolingual speakers in Ethiopia. It is spoken in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Israel.

Tigrinya is a major language of Eritrea, yet, not the sole official language, as Eritrea recognizes nine languages. These nine languages are the basis of a progressive mother-tongue education system in Eritrea, which continues up to the fifth grade.

Tigrinya means "the language of the Tigray people" and is spoken in the highlands, while Arabic is spoken along the coast, and English is the language of the towns. Though Tigrinya and Tigre are very close, they are not mutually intelligible.

Tigrinya belongs to the Semitic, North Ethiopic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Tigrinya is descended from an ancient Semitic language called Ge'ez and still used by the Coptic Church. Ge'ez was the original language of the **Beta Israel (The House of Israel)**, as the Jews of Ethiopia and Eritrea are generally known. The Bible, translated from the Septuagint Greek version, is read in Ge'ez, and most ancient religious texts of **Beta Israel** are written in Ge'ez. Ge'ez originated from the Aramaic version of Phoenician.

In the first millennium BCE, immigrants arrived in present-day Eritrea and mixed with the Cushitic population, forming new languages, such as Ge'ez, as a result of this union.

Ge'ez was the classical language of the Axum Empire of Northern Ethiopia that existed between the first century CE and the sixth century CE. When the power base of Ethiopia shifted from Axum to Amhara between the 10th century CE and the 12th century CE, the use of Amharic spread its influence, hence becoming the national language in Ethiopia and area.

### • SCRIPT:

#### ◊ **Fidel**

Tigrinya has its own script, **fidel**, derived from Ge'ez. The Ge'ez script was developed from the ancient Phoenician-Sabaeen script, as was the Greek alphabet. The **fidel** script is syllabic, with

over 200 characters, each representing a different sound. Thus, Tigrinya has a character for **ba**, **be**, **bi**, **bo** and so on, which are variations of the same basic character. The same *fidel* script is used for Amharic and Tigre.

## LINGUISTIC COMPARISON

	ENGLISH	TIGRINYA
<b>LANGUAGE FAMILY</b>	Indo-European (West Germanic branch)	Afro-Asiatic (Semitic, North Ethiopic branch)
<b>WRITING SYSTEM</b>	- alphabet, Latin script - non-phonetic - written from left to right	- alphabet, Ge'ez script - syllabic - written from left to right
<b># OF LETTERS</b>	26	231 (33 consonants x 7 vowels)
<b>VOWELS</b>	6 written, 15-16 spoken	7
<b>DIFFERENT CONSONANTS</b>	th ( <i>this, the</i> ), w, ng ( <i>sing</i> )	- more throaty, glottal stops - 3 types: voiced and voiceless pairs and emphatic (voiceless + glottal stop)
<b>CAPITALIZATION</b>	- begins new sentences with capitals	- no capitalization - colon = end of word - double colon = end of sentence
<b>COMBINATION</b>	- each syllable has vowel - many consonant clusters	- words begin with consonant and end in vowel - vowel/consonant sound creates syllables
<b>NUMBERS</b>	- written from left to right	- written from left to right - uses Arabic (English) numerals for common use, but writes numbers in words for religious texts
<b>ORDER</b>		
• <i>sentence</i>	- subject + verb + object - time words at end or beginning of sentence	- subject + object + verb - time words at beginning of sentence
• <i>adjective</i>	- adjective + noun	- adjective + noun
<b>NOUNS</b>		- noun inflected for gender (3) and number
<b>ARTICLES</b>		
• <i>indefinite</i>	- <i>a, an</i> + noun	- suffixes added to noun to change its gender and specifics
• <i>definite</i>	- <i>the</i> + noun	- suffixes added to noun to change its gender and specifics

<b>VERBS</b>	- subject separate - verb only inflected for some verbs ( <i>to be</i> ) and in some tenses	- separate or part of verb - verb inflected for tense by using suffixes/prefixes
<b>PRONOUNS</b>		
• <i>subject</i>	- always written	- not always written, part of verb
• <i>object</i>	- differs from subject - appears after verb	- appears before verb as prefix
• <i>possessive (adj)</i>	- differs from above - appears before noun	- before noun as prefix
<b>PLURALS</b>	- adds suffix <i>s, es, ies</i> - has few irregular forms	- irregular forms
<b>TENSES</b>	- 3 forms of verb: present, past, past part. - tenses changed with <i>ed</i> suffix, whole word or with <i>to be, to have, will</i>	- 3 forms of verb: present, past, past part. - tense changed by suffixes
<b>COMMANDS</b>	- infinitive form of verb	- present form of verb - suffix added to verb to indicate object of command
<b>? FORM</b>	- question word/auxiliary verb + subject - verb + subject	- question word/intonation
<b>NEGATIVE FORM</b>	- uses auxiliary verbs - <i>to be + not</i>	- suffix added to verb
<b>VERB/ 2ND VERB</b>	- verb + <i>to</i> + infinitive	- verb + root
<b>MODALS</b>	- modal + infinitive (no <i>to</i> )	- modal + root
<b>FORMALITY</b>	- 3 levels - levels changed by use of modals and longer sentence structures	- 2 levels - <i>tu</i> and <i>vous</i> type forms - inflected for gender
<b>SWEARING/ OATHS</b>	- involves subjects of sex/bodily functions	- prohibited - children may use ones connected to subjects of sex - oath on parents' names
<b>VOCABULARY/ FOREIGN INFLUENCE</b>	- higher level of writing, Greek/Latin	- higher level of spoken, Italian or Arabic - Christian refugees learnt Greek, too

- **Leddet, Christmas**, January 7th
- **Timkat, Epiphany**, January 19th
- **Workers' Day**, May 1st
- **Martyrs' Day**, June 20th
- **Start of the Armed Struggle**, September 1st
- **Kiddus Yohannes, Orthodox New Year**, September 11th
- **Meskel, Finding of the True Cross**, September 27th
- **New Year's Day**, January 1st
- **Orthodox Epiphany**, January 19th
- **Eid-ul-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice)**
- **El am Hejir New Year (Pilgrimage)**
- **Women's Day**, March 8th
- **Orthodox Easter Monday**, April/May
- **Eid-Milad Nabi, Muhammad's Birth**
- **Independence Day, National Day**, May 24th
- **Martyrs' Day**, June 20th
- **Beginning of Armed Uprising**, September 1st
- **End of Ramadan**
- **Christmas Day**, December 25th

## LITERATURE/CULTURE

Arts and crafts and secular music are performed mostly by artisans. Sacred music and iconic art are performed and rendered by monastically-trained men.

### • **Music**

The people have a rich heritage of music and dance, using drums and stringed instruments tuned to their five-tone scale. The sound is similar to Arabic or Indian music.

Music is an integral part of life with both secular and religious roots. There are four main traditional instruments: the *krar*, a guitar-type instrument; the *abangala*, a banjo-type instrument and the

**cira-wata**, a violin-type instrument. Drums, called **kebero**, are played by both sexes. The drum player supplies the energy to the event.

- **Dance**

Dancing is also very popular. They dance on the occasion of a new birth, marriage or during cultural and religious festivals. In some, men dance in a group, **someeya**. This style is quite energetic and involves leaping and stick waving. **Kunaman** dances are beautiful, colourful and very sensual, danced in couples. In the lowlands, women dance the **sheleel**, shaking their long, plaited hair across their faces.

- **Art**

Art was heavily influenced by the War of Independence. During the war, the artist's goal was to uplift the national spirit and to honour those fighting or who had died. After independence, the government asked artists to look at the local landscape and cultural heritage for inspiration. The artist, Tirhas lyassu, promotes gender equality through her images. Often, she paints pictures of men looking after children.

- **Handicrafts**

The handicrafts are known for their vibrant colours, with each area specializing. The Nara are known for their saddles and baskets. The Beni-Amer make an ebony-hilted dagger with a curved, two-edged blade.

- **Writing**

Most of the folklore and cultural legends are passed down orally. Eritrea has only a few writers, although the country is promoting writing in the various ethnic languages.

**Artist:** Tirhas lyassu

**Poet:** Reesom Haile

## OTHER

- Coffee is a very important ceremonial drink. The "*coffee ceremony*" is common. Beans are roasted on the spot, ground and served thick, in tiny, ceramic cups with no handles. When the beans are roasted to smoking, they are passed around the table, where the smoke becomes a blessing on the drinkers.

- People show their appreciation for singers by kissing or hugging them. People also sometimes place banknotes on the singer's forehead or hand.



## SOURCES/SUGGESTED REFERENCES

- |                         |                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Encyclopedia Britannica | Vol. 22 1991 ed.                                                                                                            |
| Collier's Encyclopedia  | Vol. 9 1991 ed.                                                                                                             |
| The Globe and Mail      | <b>Little Eritrea Emerging as Oasis of Peace and Civility</b><br>Pg. A12<br>Wednesday, June 1, 1994<br>(International News) |

## WEBSITES

- bh.org.il
- ciaworldbook.com
- drunkenboat.com
- ethnologue.com
- greatcom.org
- lonelyplanet.com
- national-holidays.com
- settlement.org
- tigrinya.com
- unesco.org
- United States Library of Congress - World Studies Reference

**Linguistic/Cultural “ambassador”:**

Ghebresslassie Mezgbo

