

# AMHARIC

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The origins of the Amharic language are traced back to the 1st millennium B.C. It is rumored that they are the descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Immigrants from southwestern Arabia crossed the Red Sea into present-day Eritrea and mixed with the Cushitic population. New languages formed as a result of this union, e.g., Ge'ez. Ge'ez was the classical language of the Axum Empire of Northern Ethiopia. It existed between the 1st Century A.D. and the 6th Century A.D. When the power base of Ethiopia shifted from Axum to Amhara between the 10th Century A.D. and the 12th Century A.D., the use of the Amharic language spread its influence, hence becoming the national language.

Amharic is a semitic language that uses a script which originated from the Ge'ez alphabet. It has 33 basic characters with each having 7 forms for each consonant-vowel combination. Unlike Arabic, Hebrew or Syrian, the language is written from left to right.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has dominated religious life in the country since the fourth century. It has a strong monastic tradition, and until the Marxist revolution, there were Orthodox clergy in almost every town in the country. Orthodoxy appears to be amazing combination of more standard Christian beliefs in God, Jesus and Catholic saints with some Judaic element, which is reflected in religious practices. African beliefs about spirits and devils, astrology and fortune telling are also observed within the Orthodox Christian community .

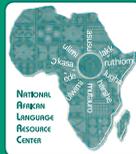
Injera is the mainstay of the Ethiopian diet. This phenomenally bouncy bread is made from the peculiarly Ethiopian cereal teff. The other ubiquitous food is wat, the sauce in which meat, vegetables and cereals are cooked - wat comes in a fiery, kay format, or as the milder alicha.

The southern region of Kefa claims to be the original home of coffee, and the bean have been grown in Ethiopia since 1000AD - you can certainly find decent cappuccinos and even macchiatos in Addis Ababa. T'ella is the local home brew, a beer made from barley, wheat or maize - it's supplemented with t'ej, local honey wine, and arakie, an incredibly strong grain spirit.

## STUDYING AMHARIC IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Amharic. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>.

Boston University  
Michigan State University  
Stanford University  
University of California at Los Angeles  
University of California at San Diego  
University of Florida  
University of Pennsylvania



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AN ETHIOPIAN COFFEE CEREMONY

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## WHY STUDY AMHARIC?

Amharic is one of the major languages in Ethiopia. It is spoken by more than 17 million people, about one third of Ethiopia's population. It has been the language of the court and the dominant population group in Highland Ethiopia since at least the late 13th century and remains the official language of Ethiopia today. As the national language, Amharic is spoken in every province, including the Amhara region. Amharic is one of the rare languages in Africa with its own writing system, a semi-syllabic system called "fidel."

Amharic is also one of the most widely studied languages in Ethiopia. It is a field of study at the B.A. and M.A. level and in the school curriculum it is taught as a subject in most elementary and secondary levels of education. In the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, and in most major towns, it is the medium of instruction for primary level education. Because of its past and present role, Amharic has served as a medium of study of Ethiopian culture and society. Knowledge of the Amharic language is essential to understanding Ethiopian culture.

Amharic is very useful to scholars in anthropology, history, and archaeology as well as in linguistics, since Ethiopia is a land of great history and treasures. The discovery of Lucy, the three-million-year-old skeleton, or "dink'nesh" in Amharic ("You are wonderful"), in what is now the Afar area in eastern Ethiopia, was a momentous event in the history of Ethiopia, and world archaeology.

Ethiopia provides a rich resource to geologists and biologists. Massive erosion over the years on the Ethiopian Plateau has created Simien National Park, one of the most spectacular landscapes in the world. With jagged mountain peaks, deep valleys and sharp precipices dropping some 1,500 m., this area is home to many rare animals such as the Geleda Baboon, the Simien Fox and the Walia Ibex, a goat found nowhere else in the world.

Others can also benefit from learning Amharic. International non-profit groups such as The Red Cross, Peace Corps, SIDA and IFESH as well as United States diplomats and advisors continuously work in Ethiopia and require language training in Amharic.

## WHO SPEAKS AMHARIC?

### PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Ethiopians have a record of their rulers that stretches back 3000 - 5000 years. In fact, you can find Biblical passages which record Ethiopian episodes around 1000 BC. The son of the Queen of Sheba, Menelik I, is regarded as the first emperor of Ethiopia - his dynasty ended with Haile Selassie I, who ruled from 1930 until 1974.

In the first three centuries A.D., Semitic-speaking people built a "South Arabian" (or "North Ethiopian") type of civilization in Eritrea, later centering about Aksum in Tigray Province. As early as the middle of the fourth century, military expeditions may have reached the area later known as Amhara. By the mid-ninth century, a distinctive Amhara region was recognized. The conquering Semitic-speakers spoke a language which was perhaps only four to seven centuries removed from a common origin with Ge'ez, the classical language of the Aksum Empire and of Medieval Ethiopian religious literature. Meanwhile an interesting process was taking place among the subjugated peoples. The military forces were drawn from a number of diverse ethnic groups: perhaps largely Agew, but with significant numbers of speakers of other Cushitic and Omotic languages - they may have had Nilo-Saharan-speaking servants, slaves, and artisans. A language based on "Cushomotic" syntax (i.e., verb-final) and Semitic lexicon was being used for communication in the ranks and among many of the peasants of Amhara region. The Amhara are not a cohesive group, politically or otherwise. Many Amhara in the core area of Gonder, Gojjam, and western Wello believe that the Amhara of Shewa (who constituted the basic ruling group under Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie) are not true descendants of the northern Amhara, the Tigray and heirs to the ancient kingdom of Aksum. Unlike the Oromo, who constitute Ethiopia's second largest linguistic category, the Amhara maintain a nearly homogeneous religion and mode of livelihood. Regional variation aside, the Amhara are mostly Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and they generally live in the highlands as plow agriculturalists.



Amharic dancers.



Riding in "tonkwa," a boat made of papyrus.



Ethiopian Orthodox Ceremony.