

TIGRINYA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Tigrinya language is the most widely used in Eritrea; it is a designated working language in the country. Approximately half of the population of Eritrea is Tigrinya speaking Christians who traditionally inhabited the core plateau. The other half are Muslims who are divided among several ethnic and linguistic groups such as Tigre, Afar, Saho, Kunama and Arabic. The Eritreans, locally known as Ertrawyan, have valuable resources such as potash deposits, gold, iron, copper, zinc, salt and possibly petroleum. These resources have supported a largely agricultural way of life for the Eritreans.

Tigrinya is also spoken by the Tigreans in the northern region of Ethiopia whose cultural heritage is found in their religions, languages, and extended families. Most Ethiopians place more importance on an idealized ethos of cultural refinement than on artifacts of culture. This is reflected in their respect for human sanctity, the practice of social graces, and the blessings of accumulated wisdom. Their religion provides them with the basic tenets of morality. They consider the invocation of God as the best means of sealing agreements, delivering promises, and seeking justifiable redress for any wrong doing. Ethiopian culture is rich in hospitality, as this is recognized as the ultimate expression of grace in social relations. The people of Ethiopia bestow a great deal of respect on old age because of the piety, wisdom, knowledge, prudence and altruism that accompany such prominence in the society. The early advent of Christianity in the country promoted a rich Ecclesiastical architecture, with its structures and frescoes reflecting some influences from the Byzantine and the Coptic Church.

STUDYING TIGRINYA IN THE U.S.

Listed below are the universities in the United States that offer Tigrinya. For further information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>

Michigan State University
Summer Cooperative African Language
Institute (SCALI)



NATIONAL AFRICAN
LANGUAGE RESOURCE
CENTER (NALRC)

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TIGREAN WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY TIGRINYA?

Tigrinya (ti-GRIN-yuh) is spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Horn region of Africa. The Tigrinya (also referred to as Tigrean) people are descendants of early Semitic peoples who originally settled in the Horn of African about 1000 BC. Tigrinya is the primary language of the people. Their second languages are Tigre, Arabic and English in Eritrea, and Amharic and English in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. Tigrinya language means "the language of the Tigray people" and is spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of Eritrea and the inhabitants of the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Tigrinya has its own alphabet derived from Ge'ez, an old Semitic language not currently spoken but used in church services by the Coptic Church.

The knowledge of Tigrinya language is essential to students in the field of Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, History and researchers who plan to conduct research in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Missionaries will find Tigrinya quite useful in evangelical work because the faith of the Coptic Church is intimately woven into the culture of the Tigrinya-speaking people and their way of life. Such cultural intimacy with the church that could be of interest includes the Ark of the Covenant and the law-oriented emphasis on observance of worship and prescribed prayers. International workers, diplomats, and Peace Corps volunteers will find Tigrinya language helpful in communicative and collaborative activities with Eritrean and Ethiopian cultures. Tigrinya, along with Arabic, is the officially designated working language in Eritrea. Remains of ancient empires, such as the Axumite Kingdom in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, and ancient monasteries are located in the Tigrinya-speaking regions of both Eritrea and Ethiopia, which should be of interest to historians and anthropologists.

WHO SPEAKS TIGRINYA?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Tigrinya language is spoken in the Horn region of Africa as a primary language by the majority of the inhabitants of Eritrea and the inhabitants of the Tigray region of Northern Ethiopia. About 3.5 million people in Eritrea and close to 5 million people in Ethiopia speak Tigrinya. The history of the two countries is closely linked. The Tigrinya (Tigrean) people are descendants of early Semitic peoples who are related to, or descended from, the Sabaean (Sheban) people. Legend has it that Emperor Menelik I, the child born of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, was the first of the Solomonic line of rulers of Ethiopia that ended with the deposing of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.

The majority of Eritreans are Tigrinya speakers. The people of Eritrea are known in history by their coastal location, which gave them their name, an Italianized version of Mare Erythraeum, the Latin version for "Red Sea."

The Red Sea was the route that the Christian and the Islam religions took in order to introduce their respective religions to the Eritrean people. The route was also important for trade. The ports were used for having access to the gold, coffee, and slaves sold by traders in the Ethiopian highlands to the south. Eritrea was an Italian colony, federated with Ethiopia following World War Two, and incorporated into Ethiopia in 1962. Eritrea became a sovereign country in 1993 after nearly three-decades of war for independence.



Tigrean schoolchildren.



Tigrean elder.



Rural Tigrean woman and baby.



Playing the krar, a traditional East African lyre.