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AMHARA OF ETHIOPIA - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

Amhara is an ethnic group, in the central highlands of Ethiopia, of about 23 million people. A 1994 census revealed that Amhara makes up 30% of the country's population. Haile Selassie reigned over Ethiopia for over 17 years. When he was overthrown in 1974 the country was marked by economic problems and a lengthy civil war. Famines have further stretched the resources of the country. Only a little over 10 % of the population has access to an all-weather road.

LANGUAGE

Amharic is a Semitic language spoken in North Central Ethiopia by the Amhara. It is the second most spoken Semitic language in the world, after Arabic. It is the 'official working' language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Outside Ethiopia, Amharic is the language of some 2.7 million emigrants (notably in Egypt, Israel and Sweden), and is spoken in Eritrea by some pre-independence Eritreans and younger deportees from Ethiopia.

RELIGION

Christianity has been the predominant religion of the Amhara with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church playing a central role in the culture of the country. According to the 1994 census, 81.5% of the Amharic region was Ethiopian Orthodox; 18.1 % was Muslim, and 0.1 % was Protestant. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church maintains close links with the Egyptian Coptic Church.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Easter and Epiphany are the most important celebrations, marked with services, feasting and dancing. There are also many 'fast' days throughout the year, when only vegetables or fish may be eaten. The very faithful could fast up to 200 days a year.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

MARRIAGE: Arranged marriages are still common. Amharic people used to marry quite young but the minimum age in Ethiopia has been raised to 18 and the attitudes to early marriage have changed. Church ordained marriages do not allow divorce. Each family hosts a separate feast after the wedding.

CHILDREARING PRACTICES: A priest will bless the new born infant and, if it is a boy, the child will be circumcised. The mother and child remain in the house for forty days after the birth of a boy and for eighty days for a girl, before going to the church for baptism. Children are breastfed for about two years. Children receive little discipline until the age five to seven, but thereafter are socialised with authoritarian discipline. Ethiopian children from the age of five or six spend their days watching the family animals. In rural environments boys herd cows and sheep and girls assist their mothers in watching babies and gathering wood. Singing plays an integral role in day to day life. Children sing songs to accompany any activities they are involved in. Increasingly, children are able to attend public schools, though this often for only half a day since the schools are very crowded.

CUISINE

Injera bo wot, made from a grain, is the staple food. *Wot* is a pepper sauce that can be made from beans or meat. The whole process of making these foods is difficult and time-consuming. Impure drinking water and deforestation are significant issues in Amharic life. These, plus other factors cause most Amharic to live in yearly risk of famine. Famines ravaged the country in 1974 and 1984.

References:

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