

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescntr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

Since the early 1990s increasing numbers of people have come from the Horn of Africa, and particularly from Eritrea, to settle in Australia. The 1996 Australian Census revealed a total of 1163 people born in Eritrea and now living in Australia. Sixty-four per cent of that number were living in Victoria (ABS 2001). In the years 1997–2000, a further 396 people who were born in Eritrea arrived in Australia (DIMA 2000).

In 2000 those from Eritrea enrolled in classes of the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) numbered 218, with the majority (122 or 56%) attending classes in Victoria.

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa, bordering the Red Sea, between Djibouti and Sudan. To the south, it is bordered by Ethiopia. Asmara is the capital city. Eritrea is 121 320 sq km in area (just over half the size of Victoria) and is divided into three main geographical zones: the western lowlands; the fertile and intensively farmed central highland region; and the eastern escarpment and coastal plains, which are mainly desert.

Historical background

Eritrea has long been a region of colonisation. From at least 2000BC, Eritrea's inhabitants intermingled with Nilotic, Hamitic and Semitic people who migrated from across Africa and Arabia.

From the first until the ninth century, the Aksumite Kingdom developed, basing its prosperity on foreign sea trade from the ancient port of Adulis. During this period, Christianity became the Aksumite State religion and had a profound effect on Eritrea's culture. The Bejas, a Cushitic people from present-day Sudan, ruled until the 14th century, when Eritrea was ruled by Bahri-Negash, and came to be known as the country of Medri-Bahri (land of the sea). The Turks arrived at the beginning of the 16th century and remained for the next 300 years, until Eritrea,

together with Sudan and Ethiopia, was invaded by the Egyptians.

Italy began colonising southern Eritrea in the late 19th century, and by the 1930s Eritrea was one of the most highly industrialised colonies in Africa. Extensive communications and transportation facilities had been established: railway lines were built between Asmara and Keren and Agordat; the port of Massawa was linked by rail to the interior; all-weather roads were constructed through the mountains of Eritrea and the lowlands.

A national identity developed during this era. People from diverse economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds were structurally linked within the colonial borders. By the 1940s, Eritrea had evolved a substantial working class, as well as a distinct urban-based intelligentsia. However, Eritreans played only a subsidiary role in the country's economic and political development: the Italian administration considered the Eritrean people as little more than a source of cheap labour.

During World War II, in 1941, with the defeat of the Italians in Africa, Eritrea became a British mandate, but was still administered by Italy until the end of the war in 1945. Britain then administered Eritrea until 1950, when the United Nations resolved, against the wishes of the Eritrean people, to federate the former Italian colony of Eritrea with Ethiopia.

Ethiopia then exerted stronger control over Eritrea. Industry and power were transferred to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Amharic replaced Tigrinya as the official language in schools. Protests against the Ethiopian regime were brutally suppressed. Although there had earlier been organised resistance, the first act of armed resistance by Eritreans against Ethiopian rule took place on 1 September 1961. Following this, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea in November 1962.

The 30 years of fighting for independence that ensued served to forge a real sense of national identity among Eritreans. In May 1991, the resistance

ended, and two years later a referendum was held, with 99.9% of the Eritrean people voting in favour of independence from Ethiopia. Independence was officially declared on 24 May 1993.

During the years of struggle, more than 750 000 people had fled Eritrea, 500 000 to neighbouring Sudan. Many returned to Eritrea after the country's liberation in 1991.

However, relations between the two countries deteriorated again when both countries disagreed over the exact border demarcation. A border war erupted in 1998, draining substantial resources, vital to its development, from Eritrea's economy. The war lasted until a formal peace agreement was signed in December 2000.

Eritrean officials reported that the two-year offensive had 'crippled already low agricultural production, destroyed an estimated two-thirds of south-west Eritrea's livestock, and caused widespread destruction to Eritrea's businesses, places of worship, homes, and the country's deteriorated transportation and water infrastructure. The war destroyed 300 schools and 90 health centres' (USCR, 2001: 4) and cost tens of thousands of lives.

At the end of 2000, approximately 356 000 Eritreans were refugees, including an estimated 350 000 in Sudan, 3000 in Ethiopia and some 3000 in Yemen. In addition, some 310 000 Eritreans were still displaced within the country at the year's end; approximately 750 000 civilians had fled their homes in mid-year, joining an estimated 250 000 Eritreans displaced earlier during the war. As well, 340 000 Eritreans had left their homes because of drought (USCR, 2001: 2).

People and cultures

The table below shows some statistics for the population of Eritrea. By way of comparison, similar figures for Australia are included.

Eritrea's population is very diverse. There are nine ethnic groups: Tigrinya (50%), Tigré (31.4%), Afar (5%), Saho (5%), Hedareb (2.5%), Bilen (2.1%), Kunama (2%), Nara (1.5%) and Rashaida (0.5%). Each group is concentrated in a particular region of Eritrea and has its own language and customs.

Languages

Tigrinya, Arabic and English are all the official languages of Eritrea. Each of the nine ethnic groups speaks its own language. Amharic, a legacy of Ethiopian rule, is also widely spoken. English is the language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education institutions.

Religions

Muslim (50%) – primarily Sunni, with a small Sufi minority. Christian (50%) – primarily Orthodox, with small numbers of Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Literacy

Approximately 25% of the population is literate.

Women

Eritrean women have experienced far greater equality than those from many other African countries. Women provided more than one-third of the troops in recent wars against Ethiopia. Now, Eritrean women have the right to vote and have a guarantee of 30% of seats in Parliament. They have their own

Table 1: A comparison of population – Eritrea and Australia

	Eritrea	Australia
Population	4 135 933 (July 2000 est)	19 436 840 (October 2001 est)
Age structure: 0–14 years	43%	21%
15–64 years	54%	67%
65 years and over	3%	12%
Population growth rate	3.86%	0.99%
Birth rate (births/1000 population)	42.71	12.86
Death rate (deaths/1000 population)	12.3	7.18
Infant mortality rate (deaths/1000 live births)	76.66 (2000 est)	4.97 (2001 est)
Life expectancy at birth (years)	55.79	79.87
Total fertility rate (children born/woman)	5.93	1.77

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics website: <http://www.abs.gov.au>

CIA – The World Factbook website: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/er.html>

national holiday, equal property rights, as well as the right to divorce and to the custody of children in any settlement.

Economy and education

Eritrea faces the economic problems of a small, desperately poor country. The economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture, with 80% of the population involved in farming and herding (sorghum, lentils, vegetables, corn, cotton, tobacco, coffee, sisal; livestock, goats; fish). Approximately 80% of the population is rural, with 35% being nomadic or semi-nomadic. Overgrazing and over-cropping have placed serious demands on the land, as have widespread practices of land clearing. Measures to combat deforestation were instituted in the 1990s, with logging, grazing and crop cultivation banned in certain areas.

Eritrea's main exports are salt, flowers, textiles, leather and livestock. Imports include fertilisers, machinery, spare parts and tools, and construction materials. In the long term, Eritrea may benefit from the development of offshore oil, offshore fishing and tourism.

At the time of independence, Eritrea's system of education had been devastated. The provision of education is a high priority of the current government. Education, which is free, consists of primary (five years), middle (two years) and upper (two years). Enrolment in schools is low, with about 50% attending primary, falling to 10% in upper schools. About 75% of the population remain illiterate, with female illiteracy being higher than that of males. Local languages are the medium at the primary level, while English is used at secondary and university levels.

Classroom issues

Eritreans are a very diverse people. Individual learners might well speak different first languages and have different cultures and religions. Teachers should therefore be careful not to make generalisations about 'Eritreans', and should not assume that students from Eritrea will automatically relate to each other. Nevertheless, because of their recent political history, Eritreans do exhibit a strong sense of national identity.

Eritreans are noted for their resilience, determination and resourcefulness, and a strong sense of pride and independence. Eritrean women have experienced far greater equality than women from many other African countries (see above) and may therefore show greater levels of independence in a learning situation than women from other cultural backgrounds.

Annotated bibliography

Australian Bureau of Statistics website:
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats>

This is the place to find statistical information on Australia. Topics covered include: Agricultural Statistics; Balance of Payments and International Investment; Building and Construction; Consumer Income and Expenditure; Crime and Justice; Demography; Education; Finance; Environment; Health; Indigenous Statistics; International Trade; Labour Market; Manufacturing Statistics; Mining; National Accounts; Population and Migration; Prices; Producer and Foreign Trade Indexes; Public Sector; Retail and Service Industries; Social Statistics; Stocks and Manufacturers' Sales; Tourism; Transport; Welfare and Social Services; Reserve Bank of Australia and OECD data.

BBC News website:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/africa/newsid_784000/784347.stm

This site contains the text of BBC news stories of Eritrea. It provides current information on the political situation, as well as some archival news stories.

CIA – The World Factbook website:
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/er.html>

This site presents a map of Eritrea together with facts and figures of that country: geography, people, demography, government, economy, communications, transportation, military and transnational issues.

DIMA 2000. *Immigration Update*, June quarter

This quarterly report provides information on the numbers and characteristics of immigrants to Australia. Tables of figures on applicant type, age, eligibility category of migration (eg family, skill, humanitarian program) are presented, together with birthplace and State/Territory of intended residence.

Eritrea – Consular Information Sheet website:
<http://travel.state.gov/eritrea.html>

This site presents background information for potential travellers to Eritrea. It contains a very brief description of the country, then outlines entry requirements, issues of safety and security, medical facilities, and traffic safety and road conditions.

Eritrea – General Information website:
<http://denbe.asmarino.com/asmario/Eritrea>

This site contains clear, easy-to-access information on Eritrea, its history, geography, climate, people and government. It also provides contact details for Eritrean embassies and links to other sites providing information about Eritrea for tourists.

Eritrea Network Information Centre (ENIC) website:

<http://eritrea.org>

This site contains links to information on many aspects of the country: history, population, education, geography, economy, government policy, maps, books.

Ethnologue website:

<http://www.ethnologue.com>

This website provides extremely detailed information on the many languages in use in Eritrea, together with their distribution and population. A look at this site will serve to emphasise the potential diversity of languages to be found in learners from Eritrea.

Gordon, F L 2000. *Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti*. Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications

Written for the potential traveller, this book contains more than 100 pages of interesting historical and background information on the country and people of Eritrea. It provides a clear, detailed map of the country and several striking, coloured photographs that could be used in the classroom as conversation starters with small groups of students.

Hailimariam, C, S Kroon and J Walters 1999. 'Multilingualism and nation building: Language and education in Eritrea'. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 20 (6), 475–93

This paper focuses on language choice in Eritrea. It surveys pre- and post-colonial language policies and their social consequences.

Lonely Planet World Guide website:

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/africa/eritrea>

This site provides a condensed version of the information found in the Lonely Planet guidebook. It gives a quick, easy-to-access, comprehensive overview of Eritrea.

Sangster, S and P Nichols 1996. 'An investigation into the reasons for the literacy difficulties experienced by female ESL students from Ethiopia and Eritrea in Perth, WA' (an NLLIA small-scale research project). Bentley, WA: Curtin University of Technology

This paper is essential reading for teachers of learners from Eritrea and Ethiopia. It reports on the findings of a study that included interviews with learners. The success of particular classroom activities is described and it makes useful suggestions to teachers.

Stanford University 'Africa South of the Sahara' website:

<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/eritrea.html>

This site contains links to over 50 sites with information about Eritrea on a wide range of topics including archaeology, railways, photographs, banking, development and current news.

UNESCO – The EFA 2000 Assessment Country

Reports/Eritrea:

<http://www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/eritrea/>

This is a long and very detailed report, including statistics, of education in Eritrea. It provides information for all levels of education.

UNHCR Country Profiles – Eritrea:

<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

This site provides detailed accounts, archival and photographic, of refugee issues throughout the world.

United States Committee for Refugees (USCR):

<http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/africa/eritrea.htm>

This site provides detailed information on the numbers of Eritrean refugees, the underlying political causes and effects on the Eritrean people.

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