

Forging Plowshares in Eritrea

Written by Louis Werner

Photographed by Lorraine Chittock

North of the horn of Africa, between the regions known in Pharaonic times as Kush and punt-now northeastern Sudan and Somalia, respectively-one of the ancient world's oldest trading lands has become one of the modern world's youngest sovereign states.



A funnel-shaped country as large as Pennsylvania, slightly smaller than England, Eritrea's narrow "spout" runs northwest to southeast between the Red Sea and Ethiopia. At its southern end, it borders diminutive Djibouti. In the north, the mouth of the funnel opens toward Sudan. Geography and history have given Eritrea its name, which comes from the Greek word *erythros*, "reddish," and the Greek name for the Red Sea, *Erythra Thalassa*.

At the throat of the Eritrean funnel, a high central plateau, the site of Asmara, the capital, separates a sweltering coastal strip from game-rich lowlands in the northwest. In the south, the Danakil Depression lies 116 meters (380') below sea-level; the highlands of the north reach up to 2700 meters (8000'). This topographically and climatically diverse land was given its form by the same violent plate tectonics that began opening the Red Sea and ripping apart Africa's Rift Valley some 25 million years ago.

Eritrea's physical diversity has its analogue in the nation's citizenry. When Italian ethnographer Conti Rossini called neighboring Ethiopia "a museum of peoples," he might well have included Eritrea in his assessment. The country's 3.8 million citizens are evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, and include nine major ethnic groups speaking nine different tongues classified in language groups from Nilo-Saharan to Kushitic and Semitic.

The Muslim population includes the Rashaydah, Afar, Bilen, and the Beja tribal confederacy's Beni 'Amer people. (See *Aramco World*, July/August 1993) Muslims also make up majorities among the Kunama, Baria, Saho and Tigre people. Even among the Tigrinya, Eritrea's largest ethnic group and its leading Christian community, there is a significant Muslim minority, known as Jabarti, who claim descent from Islam's third caliph, 'Uthman.

Although the Tigrinya language, closely related to Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, is the dominant tongue of high-Landers and of Eritrea's central government, Arabic remains the *lingua franca* of trade in the coastal and western provinces. It is spoken indigenously, however, only by the Rashaydah, an Arab tribe that arrived here from across the Red Sea only 150 years ago.

Although Eritrea's early history is indistinguishable from that of the surrounding region, the country's present is freshly written in the blood of its war of independence from Ethiopia, which began in 1961

and ended in May of 1991. On the Eritrean side alone, some 100,000 died. Today, the memory of this awful sacrifice is driving a full-throttle nation-building process in which all in public service—from President Isaias Afwerki down to Asmara's street sweepers—accept pay at military rates.

Minister of Finance Haile Woldense, who has given more than half his life to the struggle for independence, points out that Eritrea's path from colony to state has been unique. "Self-reliance was our wartime philosophy, and in peace we must still put every penny to productive use," he says.

Owing to its strategic location, Eritrea had always been the object of foreign designs—Egyptians, Axumites, South Arabians, Portuguese and Ottoman Turks all had a hand in shaping its early history. Italians established a colonial administration in Asmara in 1889 and ruled until they were defeated during World War II by British army units based in Sudan. Nearly a decade of British administration ensued, followed in 1952 by federation with Ethiopia and, in 1962, outright annexation—a move that set off the generation-long war for independence in deadly earnest.

A short stroll through Asmara reveals this history. At the city's high point stands the rococo National Palace, built as the Italian colonial headquarters, later used as a British school and then claimed by Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie. Now, it houses local antiquities: alabaster Sabaeen heads; monumental Axumite stelae; Arabic headstones in Kufic script; and medieval Coptic manuscripts—all testimony to Eritrea's role as one of the world's crossroads.

Says Museum Director Yoseph Libsekal, "We have so much, but the war completely shut down archeology here for 30 years. We don't know what's underground; we haven't yet even surveyed the surface of the known sites. Many foreigners are interested in digging, but it takes time to prepare for them to come."

Time, indeed: Eritrea's Sabaeen period goes back to the seventh century BC, and Libsekal is, at this writing, his country's only resident trained archeologist. The latest Eritrean find of international importance is the skull of an early hominid, *Australopithecus afarensis*, of the same family as the Ethiopian "Lucy" skeleton found in 1972 and thought to be 3.2 million years old. Although this new skull is not yet dated with confidence, it belongs perhaps to Lucy's older sister, as it was found in rock formations believed to be nearly four million years old.

Not far from the museum, Petros Haile Mariam, who oversees the weekly *Eritrea Profile* at the Ministry of Information, faces a uniquely contemporary problem: language preference. Although five times as many copies of *Eritrea Profile* are printed in Tigrinya as in Arabic, this does not, Mariam insists, reflect government favoritism. "We will not permit an official language," he says, "which in our case would also create a *de facto* official ethnic group. Each group will use its own language for its own development." But that, he admits, will prove difficult when four of the country's nine tongues have no written script.

Continue now down Asmara's palm-lined main thoroughfare, renamed Liberation Avenue, thinly trafficked with bicycles, horse-drawn carts and sputtering Fiat 1500's, and past the city's Italianate architecture: the travertine-tiled Al-Khulafa' al-Rashidin Mosque, with a minaret that appears to have been inspired by a Roman column; the Lombard-style Catholic church and Opera House; and finally the art deco Cine Impero, whose aging cappuccino machines still steam and hiss at the concession stand.

Everywhere, storefront signs—"Eritrea is Free!", "Eritrea Forever!", "Eritrea: My Country!"—proclaim a new day. But it is just off this avenue that one may also glimpse the country's future. Here, in an intraocular lens factory, state-of-the-art post-cataract eye implants are manufactured in super-sterile, triple-air-locked "clean rooms."

This computer-operated facility turns out lenses that surpass international standards at less than one-tenth the price of those manufactured in industrialized countries. Says manager Solomon Russom, "Whenever our lathe needs recalibrating, we just hook up our modem to a mainframe in the USA. 'Appropriate technology,' for us, means the most very advanced we can manage to get our hands on, even by long-distance."

From the lens factory, walk to the Medabar workshops. Far from the computer world, far even from the industrial revolution, this is nonetheless one of the many places in Asmara that demonstrates what Finance Minister Woldense said about self-reliance. Here, hammer blow by hammer blow, a military economy is being converted into a peacetime one. Army fuel barrels are beaten into *injera* bread ovens. Jeep tires are cut into sandals. Bindings from ammunition crates are woven into bed springs—just some of the war materiel being put to imaginative civilian use.

Emerging also from wartime are newly forged guarantees of religious freedom for non-Christians. Both Haile Selassie and the communist Derg regime, which ruled Ethiopia after Selassie's death in 1974, banned Islam, which now flourishes. Under the proposed constitution, Muslims will have recourse to *shari'a*, or religious, courts in matters of personal law, and the mufti, the leader of the country's Muslims, is appointed by a National Waqf Council. Eritrea's newly installed mufti, Shaykh al-Amin Osman al-Amin, receives visitors in his Italianate villa with a commanding view of Asmara. A 1954 graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, he remembers the nation's darkest days.

"The Emperor [Selassie] tried to create conflict between religions in order to manipulate the colony, and then the Derg bombed our mosques, not so much to suppress the faith as to kill whoever took shelter there. But Christian and Muslim Eritreans fought for our freedom together, and now we both taste it equally," he says.

With al-Amin as a spiritual leader, the worldly affairs of mosque-building, property management and religious scholarships have been entrusted to Dr. Burhan Abd al-Qadir, a former judge and current president of the National Waqf Council. For 10 years prior to independence he worked as a lawyer in San Francisco, and now he has returned to open a private practice in both civil and *shari'a* law.

"Our work is cut out for us," he says, sitting in his book-lined office upstairs from the city's main mosque. "The Saudis have given us five million dollars and sent engineers to build 30 mosques. Ten teachers from Al-Azhar are here to teach our advanced students, and we have 800 pupils in this *madrasa* [school] alone. But still, I find my main job is going to international Islamic conferences just to say that Eritrean Muslims are now free!"

Along the Red Sea coast, however, efforts like Abd al-Qadir's in the capital are hardly necessary. Here, Eritrea's second city of Massawa has enjoyed close ties to the Arabian Peninsula for centuries, and Islam

has remained vibrant. It is to this coastal plain that one must descend to find Eritrea's richest Islamic history.

That descent is a remarkable one—a nearly 3000-meter (8000') drop in an eastward journey of only 65 kilometers (40 miles) as the crow flies! The most direct route is by the asphalt road that parallels the Italian-built narrow-gauge railway, heavily damaged in the war for independence and now about to be reopened. But the more dramatic descent is down the Filfil escarpment to the north, where the varied exposure and steeper pitches catch enough cloud cover to create tropical microclimates in astonishing proximity to the oven-dry coast.

By this dirt track one drops off the plateau onto its barley-terraced shoulders, shrouded every afternoon by incoming mists. Fruit-eating hornbills and tufted guenon monkeys here have the run of abandoned Italian citrus and coconut-palm plantations. As one eases out from under the clouds, moisture-loving mimosas give way to arid-land acacias. Nomadic Tigre goatherds pitch hemispherical sisal-mat huts in the drier foothills' thinning browse. As the terrain flattens finally to the plain, abandoned Ethiopian infantry fortifications, some consisting of only two or three piled rocks amid absolute barrenness recall the war's most pitiless fighting for this historic coastline.

Eritrea's 1151 kilometers (715 miles) of mainland shoreline and the easy access the narrow coastal strip provided to traders in search of exotic Abyssinian luxuries made it an important nexus of commerce millennia ago. Egyptians, Sabaeans, Axumites, Indians and Persians all made use of its safe anchorages, and traded untold quantities of gum, gold, honey, wax and myrrh in the fabled Axumite port of Adulis, located halfway down the Gulf of Zula.

Aeschylus left the first known record of the Eritrean coast in the fifth century BC when he wrote of its sea's "gentle ripples that are but a warm caress." Six hundred years later, the Greek navigation manual *Periplus Maris Erythraei* detailed the onshore winds, shoals, and landing procedures at Adulis. In the year 522, the Egyptian Greek known as Cosmas Indicopleustes, the "Indian Navigator," described the caravan route to the Axumite capital through Qohaito and Metara, cities that are now only archeological sites, dotted with fragmented stelae, inscriptions and the remains of palaces and storehouses.

Adulis, too, today lies buried under sand and soil brought down from the agricultural highlands by the Haddas River. Natural siltation, along with raiding from the Arabian Peninsula, doomed the port by the eighth century. The English archeologist Sir Robert Napier dug here in the last century, and partial excavations in the 1970's by the Frenchman Anfray revealed building foundations made of basalt block with interspersed courses of white stone.

To the north is the town of Argigo, which succeeded Adulis as the region's chief port after an Ottoman fleet was based there in 1517. Though it had ample water, most precious in this bone-dry region, the port lacked a good anchorage. At Argigo, goods had to be offloaded from seagoing vessels onto a nearby island and then lightered to mainland storehouses on shallow-draft dugout canoes, called *houris*. Since Ottoman times, that offloading island has been known as Massawa.

In 1870, British-appointed governor Werner Muzinger built causeways from Massawa directly to the mainland just outside Argigo, and the new port soon eclipsed both Argigo and Adulis. All that remains

now of Ottoman Argigo are the tumbled stones of a mosque, with brain-coral finials strewn on the ground, and a standing *mihrab*, or prayer niche.

The modern town of Massawa consists of three parts: the mainland's industrial strip and squatter settlements, now a temporary home for the Rashaydah nomads, still displaced by war and drought; the inner island of Toulud, at whose head crumble the remains of Haile Selassie's Egyptian-style palace; and the original port island of Basta, the heart of old Massawa and chief locus of conservation of Eritrea's Arabic cultural traditions.

Massive bombing by the Ethiopian air force just before the end of the war caused enormous losses, both human and material, among Massawa's residents, who now number 25,000. Four years after independence, many are still picking up the pieces of their coral-stone, *mashrabiyyah-screened* homes. To make their task more difficult, Massawans are also seeking a delicate balance between modernization and historical preservation.

Swiss architect Aldo Jacober, who has surveyed old Massawa's housing for international agencies, applauds the Eritrean government's first step: free housing for whoever agrees to rebuild. "To save the town's traditional character is not easy, but the first thing is to repopulate the old quarter," he says.

It seems to be working. Wandering Basta's shaded porticos and twisting backways, taking shade under its wood-roofed galleries and crenelated parapets, hearing the rumble of freight moving across the docks and reading customs-clearance agents' street signs everywhere, one recognizes a town returning to life. The 17th-century Portuguese visitor Manoel de Almeida wrote of Massawa's round-the-clock commerce, of its crowded streets and *souqs* piled high with "clothing from India, carpets, silks and Makkah brocades, medicines, pepper, cloves and a thousand other things." Those words may yet again become true.

The goldsmith's craft still seems to thrive. Muhammad Zubuyi, one of many jewelers under the *suq's* covered arcade, employs three men who work the bellows, pour the molten metal, and fuse gold roundlets, beads, dangles and stem wires into earrings, nose rings, forehead ornaments and hair chains. A Tigre man who brings in his wife's broken gold ensemble is told it will be remade like new by Tuesday.

Lamentably, not all in Massawa is so easily fixed. Al-Hajj Osman Ali, president of Massawa's Waqf Council, points out the damage the city's many mosques have suffered. The largest, the Masjid al-Hanafi, built only 50 years ago by the Italian architect Mezzidini, survived unscathed, but it is hardly significant in Massawa's long Islamic legacy. Al-Hajj Osman walks quietly past the wreckage of the 200-year-old Masjid al-Dahab, and then points out that of the 500-year-old Masjid al-Hamal al-Ansari. But, he adds, the Masjid al-Shafi'i, built two centuries ago on a mosque site almost a millennium old, has been rebuilt.

"That repair was done first because that mosque is the most important to us," he says. A fading inscription from the chapter of the Qur'an called *Al-Tawbah*, "Repentance," carved into a wooden lintel above a doorway, attests to the importance of such work and the devotion of those he leads: "The mosques of God shall be visited and maintained by such as believe in God and the Last Day."

But even this mosque site is not the oldest in Massawa. That honor—in legend if not in proven fact—goes to the "Place of Assembly," now cleared and protected inside the port area. Here is where Muhammad's followers first prayed during the so-called "first" Hijra in 615. They had fled here from the hostility of the Quraysh tribe in Makkah, responding to the Prophet's advice, as recorded by his ninth-century biographer Ibn Hisham: "If you go to Abyssinia you will find a king under whom none are persecuted. It is a land of righteousness where God will give you relief from what you are suffering."

Contacts between pre-Islamic Arabia and Abyssinia occurred as early as the fifth century BC, when Sabaeans migrated from southern Arabia to the Ethiopian highlands. Linguistically it was a homecoming of sorts, for Ethiopia is where the proto-Semitic language is thought to have been born, which later spread throughout the Middle East in all its variants. Eritreans say that the fricatives and guttural stops of their native Tigrinya sound more like Arabic than like Ethiopia's Amharic tongue.

Arabian-Abyssinian trade and reciprocal invasions continued under the Axumite Empire that, in the five centuries before Islam, was expanding outward from Ethiopia's Tigre province. Muslim rulers won their first Eritrean toehold in the seventh century by seizing the islands of the Dahlak Archipelago, off the coast of modern Massawa—an action that protected Arab shipping from Axumite pirates, who had even raided Jiddah.

Located across from Saudi Arabia's Farasan island group (See *Aramco World*, November/December 1994), the Dahlaks are bare, brutally hot, and pancake flat. The Umayyads established a penal colony there, but found no other use for them. Poet Abu al-Fath Nasr Allah al-Iskandari, quoted by Yaqut al-Rumi in his 13th-century *Kitab al-Buldan*, wrote, "The worst country is Dahlak, for whoever lands there, dies there." The saying "*In dahkhalta jazirat Dahlak satansa ahlak*" may owe its survival more to its rhyme than its meaning, but it certainly sounds forbidding: "He who sets foot on Dahlak forgets his family."

Only a handful of the archipelago's islands are inhabited today, but the largest—Dahlak al-Kabir, or Big Dahlak—was the seat of an Islamic sultanate from the ninth to the 13th centuries. To visit from Massawa requires a five-hour passage across seas so rough that it is advisable to entrust one's life only to Muhammad Ga'as, a quadrilingual Afar seaman who has sailed these waters since boyhood.

Ga'as owns the *Doha*, an 18-meter (60') diesel-powered, tiller-steered *sambuk*—a type of vessel H.R.P. Dickson called "the preeminent pearling boat of the Gulf"—built in a shipyard across the Red Sea in Jizan, Saudi Arabia. He employs Captain Ahmad Din and a four-man crew, all of whom proudly claim to know their way "from Suakin to Djibouti on this side, and from Jizan to Aden on the other."

From Massawa's jetty, Ga'as sets course first by Dissei Island's rocky summit and the Buri Peninsula's cape, and, once in the open sea, by compass alone. Ahmad Din scans the waters carefully even far from land, for many of the Dahlaks are but mid-ocean shoals. Luckily, all he sees on this trip are flying fish and dolphin—the latter he calls *abu salamah*, father of safety.

Stiff crosswinds push up high swells that the *sambuk* mounts on the diagonal. Waves wash over the deck and drain down the center hatch. "Is the sea big today?" a passenger calls somewhat desperately over the noise of the wind. "Big? No, today is small. Big is in the Bab al-Mandab, the size of a house!" he chortles.

At last we enter a shallow lagoon on Dahlak al-Kabir's windward side, near the site of the long-vanished sultanate's seat of power. All traces of it are gone, except for monolithic underground cisterns carved from coral stone and a 2000-grave necropolis. Ali Mu'min, keeper of the island's 50 camels and thousand sheep and goats, watches over the cemetery. He points to the headstones of black basalt and red and gray schist that bear Kufic and cursive Arabic script incised into their polished surfaces.

Henry Salt, a Royal Navy officer who visited Dahlak in 1814, wrote in *Voyage to Abyssinia* that the cemetery "still exhibits many vestiges of its former consequence"; the headstones remain among the best examples of their kind anywhere in the Islamic world. Nineteenth-century orientalists Rene Basset and Benedetto Malmusi removed many of them to museums in France and Italy, but most remain in place, and scholars continue to be drawn to the funerary eloquence inscribed upon them:

Oh God, verily Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad, son of 'Abd al-Rahman, son of Muhammad, is Thy servant and son of Thy two servants. Thou has taken him for Thyself and hast chosen for him what is near Thee. He lies prostrate in Thy presence and controls for himself nor harm, nor profit, nor signs rendering manifest his actions, waiting for the day of reckoning, announcing that he has put aside his faults, hoping in Thy mercy, expecting Thy forgiveness, seeking protection from Thy chastisement. Oh God, be compassionate of his prostration and make him forget his loneliness. He died, may God be pleased with him, on Wednesday, 23rd of Sha'ban of the year 327 [June 15, 939].

Near the cemetery, at a Ramadan *iftar*, or fast-breaking evening meal, Yunis Hassan recalls the time not long past when pearling supplied the village income. A pearl weighing 10 grams once fetched him 10,000 French "riyals," he says, but he more often went five days without a find of any sort. "It was not our talent that gave out, but the market," he claims. With a hint of nostalgia, he adds, "For me, three minutes underwater and 15 meters deep [50'] was never a problem. Let the new government bring us new buyers."

Back on the mainland, and perhaps as far from Dahlak's . pearldiving world as one could imagine, live the Rashaydah, Eritrea's only native Arabic-speaking ethnic group. Culturally and linguistically distinct from Eritrea's other peoples, proud of their self-reliance and, as camel herders, mobile enough to escape central authority, the Rashaydah have only recently begun to assimilate into the Eritrean economy and the country's political life. For this it took a 30-year war and a decade-long drought.

The Rashaydah crossed *en masse* from the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea hills in the middle of the last century. At once they began to face difficulties: with the Sudanese Mahdi, whom they opposed; with the Italians and the British, who cut the tribe in half when they drew the boundary between Eritrea and Sudan; and finally with the Ethiopians, who embroiled the unwilling Rashaydah in the Eritrean war.

Says Hameed al-Khubail, a leading Rashaydah trader, "We have always been different from our neighbors, but now, in a new state with legal protections, we control our fate." This indeed could mark a new beginning, and one wonders how it might compare with an opportunity that the tribe sadly lost in 1963, when Saudi Arabia's King Faysal invited the tribe to repatriate to Saudi Arabia: Only the Sudanese government's orders to the Rashaydah to leave their livestock behind blocked the deal.

Al-Khubail's wedding that evening provides a glimpse of the strength of the Rashaydahs' attachment to Arab tradition. Loading up with guests at Massawa's outskirts, five trucks careen over sandy tracks to northern beaches where Al-Khubail's camels graze. A honeymoon tent, decorated with ostrich feathers, acacia branches, silver anklets and a hand mirror, symbols of the new household, stands ready. Coffee and cardamom are pounded together in a mortar.

After breaking the day's Ramadan fast with dates and going on to main courses of lamb and rice, guests begin antiphonal calls in praise of the bride and groom. The crowd of nearly 100 circles around sword and stick dancers, who perform to the drilling pulse of drums of several sizes. The drum heads are tuned by heating them over the coffee fires. A boy grins in the crowd. "*Al-Rashaydah samhal*" he says: "The Rashaydah are the greatest!"

Before the dancing is finished, small clusters of men wander up the last dune to sit in the moonlight and gaze at the sea as the wind blows southeasterly from Yemen. The language they speak is Arabic not long removed from the Hijaz, and the camels they breed are of the bloodline established by the tribe's legendary ancestor, 'Antar. Arabia is the Rashaydahs' past-but Eritrea is their future.

And so it is too for the eight other peoples joined with them in creating Africa's newest state.

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