**Eritrea’s History is as old as Humanity!**

**By: TSEGAI Medin**

The most monotonous subject we often hear in relation to Eritrea is; *Eritrea is a new country.* What makes the country new? Physically, it is relatively small by African standards but larger than, for example, Djibouti, Monaco, the Vatican-city, Malta, Seychelles and is the same size as Pennsylvania and/or England*.*

Historically, Eritrea is the birth place of ancient and giant civilizations (the first Christianized and Islamized country) in the region; it is also socio-culturally highly diversified. Eritrea as a ‘new country’ is a misconception propagated by the media, for example in newspapers and the internet, passed to an unsuspecting public*.*

For example, on introduction to someone for the first time, one of the most frequent questions posed, after stating you are from Eritrea, *“Where are you really from?”* The majority of people, especially for the West and the USA, have no idea of the existence or whereabouts of Eritrea! However, some people pause and reply, *“The new and small country on the Horn of Africa”.* A new and small country! I am often astounded at the answer but I try to educate the speaker with a few historical facts and supply some socio-cultural information about my country, as part of the conversation. However, normally, it is neither practical nor advantageous to give a detailed history of my country; otherwise I would be happy and proud, at any time, to narrate the history of this physically small but historically robust country!

Eritrea is not easily definable; nonetheless, those who have some knowledge of its people often use a compilation of expressions and terminology for example: diversity, value, beautiful, approachable, solidarity, resistance, martyrdom, liberty and self-reliance. *Yes, as people we are proud of our attributes, but what about Eritrea’s antiquity?*

So, reader, follow me on a journey of a highly condensed, historical overview of Eritrea, starting around 25 million years ago, to the present day.

The land of Eritrea draws attention in relation to the life of mammals and humans living millions of years ago. Only recently, the fossil of a primitive Proboscideana, a relative of the modern elephant, dated approximately 22-25 million years, was discovered in the Adi-Ugri (Mendefera) and Dogail areas. These areas cover a considerable time frame, including*, a portion of African mammal evolutionary history, which is substantially unknown to science.* This species of elephants were thriving in the Miocene from the Arabian land mass to Africa; during this period Africa and Arabia were still joined as a single continent. Additionally, this continent was isolated from other land masses by surrounding oceans and seas.

Furthermore, approximately twenty millions years later, in the late Early Pleistocene era, one of the evolved Homo species was already present in the grass-land and savanna dominated areas of East Africa. The most Northern end of the rift valley (the Dandiero basin), was part of these huge savanna dominated paleoenvironments. The Buia *Homo*, like any other synonymous African Homo species were living adjacent to the costal flood plains of the Buia basin. Extensive research programs over the last two decades discovered the presence of this *Homo* species, along with a diversified species of large mammals and other animal species chronologically dating to the late Early Pleistocene. Amongst the large mammalian fauna a unique type of *Bos* was found in the basin. Due to its unique morphological traits, it retains the Eritrean name, *Bos Buiaensis*.

The *Homo* species documented at the Danakil depression was dated to ca. 1.0 million years ago and was discovered at a wide paleoecological spectrum of the depression. The renown, nearly complete fossil skull from Buia (found in the Aalad Area in 1995) was recently augmented by further evidence from nearby localities (locally known as *“Mulhuli-Amo”*). These are fossils of cranial and post cranial evidence and importantly a third molar tooth; quitepossibly belonging to three individuals of *Homo*. The discovery of a complete skull and a molar tooth of *Homo* (1.0 Ma old) is not widely common to the current knowledge within the fossil records of Africa or elsewhere in the world. The fossil specimen from Buia and Mulhuli-Amo filled the bridge between *Homo erectus* (1.4 ma) and *Homo heidelbergensis (0.65 ma*) in the *Homo* family tree. This species was the most widely known and evolutionary successful species of *Homo* to populate the modern world.

To the knowledge of current evolutionary research, this species is our direct ancestor, that is, the only Human species remaining on the planet. The invention of fire, highly complex technological stone tools, bigger brain size, bipedalism, is amongst the most recognized characteristics of this species. The Acheulian stone tools (choppers and bifaces-hand axe) are the typical technological devices employed to exploit high protein budget from a mammal bone and marrow; consequently resulting in a rapid increase in brain size and a change in the intestine gut and anatomy.

The Eritrean coastal environment revealed evidence of technological industries belonging to our direct ancestor, *Homo sapiens.* This *Homo* species conquered a wide paleoecological landscape, preferring the coastline of the Red sea around 125, 000 years ago. They adapted to survive on the coast of the Red Sea with marine-life forming a major part of their diet. These coastal habitats played a major role in understanding the sustainability of the Human evolution, the sedentary life and the dispersal of Humans. The technological evidence relating to this Homo species is evident from a number of sites along the coast of the Red Sea (Abdur, Asfet, Gelàlo in the North West and Misse in the East), dated from ca. 125, 000 to 10,000 years before present. The discoveries of Middle and Late Stone Age stone industries, in association with a variety of shells, are conspicuous along the Buri peninsula of the Eritrean Red Sea coast.

Evidence of Holocene culture (12, 000 years ago to the present) is correlated to the first emergence of the socio-cultural trophy in our land; confirmation being discovered extensively within the country. At present an attempt is being made to understand the void between the Pleistocene and Holocene culture in the basin. Thus reconstructing the cultural continuity from the remote past; the analysis is ongoing and the results so far appear promising.

Proto-historic evidence (symbolic language), rock paintings and engravings, roughly dated to around 5000-2000 years before present. Generally, after twenty to thirty generations (according to ethnographic accounts) from the present, humans start to depict their symbolic art in inaccessible caves in our region. The emergence of symbolic behaviour is associated with the first evidence of the domestication of plants and animals, sedentary life, agriculture, trade and other cultural interactions before the introduction of writing. Evidence, of such symbolic representation is documented, in the highlands and lowlands of the country. Amongst these, are for example: Adi-Alewti, Iyago, Karibosa, Saro, Mai-ainei, Quarura. The cave paintings and/or engravings are generally represented by figures of animals (*zoomorphic*), human (*anthropomorphic*) and *geometric* styles. These styles represent various levels of recording social information, for example: resistance, agriculture and art. Obviously cave paintings and drawings are securely embedded in places unlike other archaeological materials. Even today, this form of symbolic representation, within the diverse ethnic groups is still carried out in this country.

The sedentary life of complex, agro-pastoral societies in our region was traditionally believed to be thriving around the 2nd mill B.C; this period portrayed the extreme dynamics of the societies in the highlands and even the lowlands of Eritrea. Over time lands were abandoned and reinhabited by the same or different societies. Societies chose to live in the higher lands for defense reasons and to ensure the marshy areas were reserved for agriculture, also in order to avoid insect-borne diseases. Furthermore, the sedentary life of the societies enabled them to introduce agriculture, ceramic technology, trade (barter exchange), rituals and construction of dwellings. This phase covers a period of time from the beginning of the medieval era. Evidence of sites that fall within this time frame are common and are equally distributed within the country; including the Harenay, Kokon, Greater Asmara Area (*Sembel, Maitemanay, Maichehot, Una Gudo, Weki-Duba)*, Dekemhare (*Kurbaria*), Dubarwa (*Oelebes*) and Adi- Bari.

Trade between the indigenous societies played a vital role in promoting socio-cultural interactions. This network soon ventured further towards the sea, probably due to the necessity of salt and obsidian materials in the hinterland. Trade links produced the exchange of various products like, Myrrh, frankincense *(Boswellia, and commiphera)* elephant ivory, ebony, gold and animals (panthers, cheetah, monkeys and baboons). These trade links were with societies within the region and also further to the North with the Egyptian Pharaoh. Eritrea was considered one of the most exotic and mysterious places to the Egyptian Pharaohs. The geographical link was recorded in the Egyptian inscriptions during the time of Amenhotep III. Moreover, recent DNA analysis from mummified baboons in the British Museum revealed the location of their origin as being the land of Punt within the territory of Eritrea and some parts of Eastern Sudan.

The ancient Port city of Adulis is recorded as a gateway to external influences and prosperity in various classical sources. For example, it is renown in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (1st c. A.D.) and the *Christian Topography* (6th c. A.D.) as an important port of trade in Antiquity. Adulis, served as a hub for trade between external domains including the Romans, the Egyptians, Indians, Greeks, Arabs and the hinterland of Africa. The sites of Qohaito *(tentatively listed in UNESCO World Heritage List),* Metera, Keskese, Tokonadaè and further to Axum were amongst the most prosperous cities, having strong ties with trade and administration to the Adulite Kingdom.

Significant scientific studies were not conducted at this site; although two phases of field work were organized in 2004 and 2005 by the National Museum of Eritrea, the University of Asmara and Southampton University. However, after a succession of colonial destructive excavations, a five years research plan was established in 2010 between the Eri-Italian Museums and Universities. This research project is expected todraw attention to the scientific importance of this port city and reveal its mysterious connection to other external entities under scientific scrutiny.

The Medieval part of Eritrea has a tremendous and complicated history. This period encompasses the introduction and foundation of the leading religions in our region, ca. 4th and 7th century AD. Evidence of ancient Churches for example the Kidane-Mihret church, Senafe) and Mosques (Sahaba, Massawa, along with new theological doctrines, religious cultures and comprehensive scientific knowledge were flourishing at its peak. In addition, the kingdoms (*Bahri Negestat)* in the highlands of the country were successively engaging in hostile battles with the Ethiopian kings, the Islamic power from the lowlands and other external colonial powers. There are signs of raided Monasteries and churches during this time. Based on present ethnographic accounts, followers of these major religions were cohabiting peacefully and continue to do so; however, like any other periods of history, this part of Eritrean history is not fully understood even to date.

The recent history of Eritrea is primarily linked to the unprecedented struggle for liberation, preceded by desolate and successive colonial times. Traces of colonial vestiges for example, the Asmara architectural parameter are evident over extensive areas of the country *(The historical parameter of Asmara is in the Tentative List of UNESCO world heritage list).* Eritrea was in the dark clutches of colonialism for centuries and the impact was colossal. Following successive colonial oppression, Eritreans eventually started to oppose such dominance. Initially this movement was limited to individuals and small groups; however, later the support increased leading to an organized demeanor for freedom from oppression.

As did our forefathers, the generation of that period fought for liberation over a period of approximately thirty years. The struggle became feasible through the mass participation of people from all age ranges and gender. The EPLF (Eritrean People`s Liberation Front*)*, struggled without allies to successfully overthrow this awesome Ethiopian power from the sovereign land of Eritrea in 1991. The long, genuine Eritrean struggle proved successful due to a number of reasons including a strong culture of solidarity, progressive resistance to oppression, martyrdom, self-reliance. Finally, the strong unity and/or harmony of the people brought about the downfall of a long colonial period in our history. In 1993, Eritrea’s independence following a successful referendum was secured.

However, after seven peaceful years, an unforeseen and insignificant war emerged with the neighbouring country of Ethiopia. It is believed; this war was fabricated by the US administration and physically carried out by the Ethiopian Government. It is suggested, the overall hidden agenda was to control the sovereign land of Eritrea, exploit its resources and subject its people to eternal hardships such as emigration, hunger and illiteracy. Nowadays, it appears, the American government is engaging in repetitive attempts to pass punitive sanctions against Eritrea, to agitate the economic boom in the country and to create an unstable political ambiance in the Horn of Africa.

Hence, as this article has highlighted, Eritrea has experienced a rich and diverse history overwrought with intense periods of difficulty. The present day Eritrea with its diverse culture in not by any means an overnight creation! The cradle of humanity sited in Eritrea evidenced by the fossil legacy of our ancestors over millions of years; is a process of the historical evolution of societies. Our history is bound in hardship, resistance and solidarity throughout time. The current political instabilities in our region are part of these historic endeavors.

Finally, nowadays the Eritrean people, as previously mentioned, are reluctantly experiencing enormous political hardships; however, *as always there is no retreat.* History is a continuous process and modern Eritrea continues its path, resisting current external political threats.

In conclusion, please remember, although I have provided a ‘glance’ of the historical background of my country Eritrea’s history is ***as old as humanity*** rather than ***an overnight created account!***