

AFAR

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AFAR

Population

The Ethiopian Central Statistical Authority (CSA) estimated the July 2008 population of the Afar Administrative Region at 1,449,000, of which 137,000 (9.4%) were urban residents [1]. Breakdowns by gender (803,000 males vs. 646,000 females) show a high sex imbalance either due to data error or due to excess mortality or outmigration of women. The numbers suggest a sex ratio of 124 (males per 100 females) often found among populations with excessive gender-specific migrations, or excessive gender-specific mortality. There are no studies suggesting disproportionately high female out-migration from the Afar Administration Region or excess male in-migration into Afar territory thus leaving us to ponder whether higher female mortality may explain the high sex ratio.

History and Tradition

The Afar live in the three neighboring Horn-of-Africa countries - Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti - and are variously described as “fearless”, “tough”, “aggressive”, “territorial” etc, all in the spirit of highlighting the tireless adherence of the Afar to a pastoral tradition handed down from successive generations, and a devotion to the defense of a way of life in a forbiddingly hostile homeland. Here is how Virginia Morrel, on assignment for the National Geographic magazine described them [2]:

“The desert may have struck me as hellish, but for them it was their gift from Allah - land and grass and water that gave them life and that they, in turn, would lay down their lives for. And, indeed, young Afar men were dying for it regularly; we heard of battles and killings throughout our six-week stay in the desert. ...Strength of mind and body were really all anyone required for survival in the desert... For them it was perfectly natural to live in a land of firebrick-red and black stones, where it hadn't rained in over a year, where every Afar had lost most of his camels because of the severe drought, and where any living green thing popped out at you like the Hope Diamond. There was really nothing to it, except that you must be brave and you must fight. "In our history we have always been fighters," Edris said one afternoon, joining in Ma'ar's discussion. "We live in the desert, and because it's a hard land, we must fight, even though killing is against the law of Allah. And when we fight, we use whatever we have: guns and knives, rocks and sticks. We will even bite with our teeth. You use everything when you fight against your enemies." "We are the people who move," one woman said. "From the beginning that has been our way." Nor is there really any other way to survive in Afar Land, or Cafar-barro as the Afar call it, particularly if you depend on a diet of camel and goat milk as they do. Less than seven inches of rain falls each year in the Danakil, often in a sporadic manner, and the only fertile soil lies far to the south of the Lake Asele salt mines, along the Awash River, one of the unusual rivers on Earth that never make it to the sea. It sinks instead into another salt lake on the Ethiopian-Djibouti border. Aside from the garden strip of the Awash, the rest of the desert is as dry and sterile as a Martian plain.”

The total number of the Afar (the combined population in all three countries) is estimated at 2 million, of which two-thirds live in Ethiopia. Tadesse Berhe, a retired Brigadier General, and Yonas Adaye of AAU report that the Afar are almost entirely Muslim. “Their native language is Afaraf, which is of Cushitic origin. Though the Afar are divided by the borders of the three countries, they maintain close physical contact, strong sentiments of kinship, and an inclusive Afar identity” [3]. They also discuss the contentious history of the Horn of Africa in general and the role of Afar grievances as a contributory factor for the numerous sub-regional conflicts of the past. They cite as the main sources of instability the Affar-Issa rivalry, the struggle for power between political parties, and inter-clan conflict over resources. These, the authors say are exacerbated by “...misguided and externally imposed development strategies, the militarisation of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia and decline of traditional values and dispute settlement mechanisms”. They also document the contradictions between the aspirations of the Afar to join together as one people, and the regional governments’ - Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti – efforts to maintain their respective national unity and territorial extent. They describe the geographical characteristics of the region as follows:

Climate and Land use

Much of Afar is dry and rocky, and therefore unsuitable for agriculture. Cultivated and arable land constitutes a mere 5.24% of an estimated total area of 97,250km²; forest 1.54%, bush and shrub 18.62%, grassland 1.56%, marshy land 2.74%, water bodies 0.63%, and degraded and rocky land 63.7 [3]. The region’s altitude ranges from a maximum of 1500m above sea level to a minimum of 166m below sea level. Temperature varies from 25°C during the wet season to 48°C during the dry season. Rainfall is erratic and scarce, and annual precipitation ranges from 200mm to 600mm. The region is exposed to persistent droughts and is among those frequently in need of food-aid due to draught.

Society

The Afar have a traditional system of leadership – sultanates – which persist to this day as the main organizing force with strong traditional following [3].

- the Tajurah sultanate (the Berhanto Derder sultan) centered in Djibouti;
- Rahayto sultanate (the Danki Derder sultan) along the border of Ethiopia and Djibouti;
- Aussa sultanate (the fiefdom of sultan Ali Mrah) centred at Assaita;
- Grifo sultanate centred at Bilu along the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea; and
- Gobaad sultanate in zone three (Gewane) of the Afar Region.⁴

Property Rights [4]

According to Bekele Hundie [4] property rights are based on a pastoral philosophy in which land belongs to the Community as defined by social ties. Clan membership is the lowest social unit upon which the definition of communal property rights over land and other natural resources is based. In principle, Afarland is equally shared among all clans of Afar but in practice the distribution is in fact dependent on resource potentials and clan dominance (numerical or political power). Each clan has

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its own territory meaning that every member of a clan can tell where the boundary of its ‘home land’ is. The boundaries are often designated by physical landmarks including, hills, mountains, rivers and barren land. However, since pastoral/nomadic existence by definition requires the crossing of clan territories, the boundaries only represent control rights (exclusion, alienation and management rights) rather than exclusive ownership.

Strategic resources such as grazing land including dry season retreats, browsing areas, and water points represent the cornerstones of clan land. Moreover, each clan has communal graveyards, settlement areas (*metaro*), and ritual sites. Each clan has a well-established gerontocracy but decision-making power regarding land and other natural resources rests with the village council consisting of the clan leader, elders, the *feima* and local wise-men. Village councils have the power of exclusion of non-members, allocation of sites to nonmembers and determination of resource use. Every member of the clan, by default, has the rights to use the fruits of clan land once he has acquired the livestock necessary to utilize land resources.

Demography and Health [5]

The HIV prevalence rate is relatively low – 2% for females and 0.6 % among males aged 15 – 49. The rate among females is three times as high as that of males. The total fertility rate of 4.9 is below the national average

The distribution of non-first births in the five years preceding the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) by number of months since preceding birth shows interesting results (see table below). Amhara is added for comparison.

Months Since Preceding Birth

Months	7 -17	18 -23	24 - 35	36 - 47	48 - 54	55 - 59	60+
Afar	14.3	17.2	33.9	17.3	6.4	1.3	9.6
Amhara	5.4	8.5	31.5	30.4	8.4	4.0	11.7

Source: [5]

There has been very little change over time in median age at marriage in Afar Region. Afar women aged 20 - 25 during the 2005 DHS had a median age at first marriage (18.8 years) similar to the median age at first marriage for women of their mothers’ generation (those aged 45 – 49) whose median age at first marriage was 19.5 years.

5.7% Afar women aged 15 - 19 were pregnant with the first child at the time of the survey; the percentage was higher in Benishangul-Gumuz (6.4%) and Gambella (6.0). The lowest percentages were in Addis Ababa (0.9%) Dire Dawa (1.8%) and Tigray (1.8%).

6.6% of Afar women were practicing any form of contraception at the time of the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey; only Somali had a lower percentage (3.1%).

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Four-fifths of Afar women were not exposed to messages about family planning due to lack of access to radio/television/print-media advertising in the few months prior to the 2005 DHS

Afar women represented the second highest percentage (12.2%) of respondents living in polygamous homes where the husband had more than two wives. The place with the highest percentage of women in such marriages during the 2005 DHS was Gambella where 15.3% of women reported being in such union.

The median number of months of postpartum amenorrhoea among Afar women following births in the three years preceding the 2005 DHS, was 13.4 months, among the shortest in the country.

According to the 2005 DHS, the percentage distribution of Afar women who indicated a desire to have no children at all or no additional children is as follows:

Number of Children already born	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Percentage of women who want no more children	13.3	16.9	16.6	29.0	33.6	17.0	16.1

Source: [5]

For Afar men the percentage distribution is as follows:

Number of Children already born	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Percentage of men who want no more children	2.5	21.0	24.8	13.3	26.6	3.9	13.5

Source: [5]

Only 6.6% of Afar women's need for family planning was met - the second lowest regional percentage. Only the adjacent region - Somali - had a lower percentage (3.1%). The average ideal number of children reported by Afar women (7.8) is more than double that of Addis Ababa. This might appear to be inexplicable given the harsh environment and socio-economic hardships faced by Afar women but a deeper analysis might prove a link with a desire to insure survival of enough children to adulthood.

The infant mortality rate of 61 and other early age mortality indicators (see below) appear to be low given the inadequate coverage of health care services in the region, and in view of DHS results which showed that the highest proportion of children under five with height-for-age measures two standard deviations (56.6 %) below the mean level live in Afar.

Neonatal mortality rate (per 1000)	Post-neonatal mortality rate	Infant mortality rate	Child mortality rate	Under-five mortality rate
33	28	61	66	123

Source: [5]

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The table below compares the percentage vaccination coverage of Afar children with those in Tigray. It shows, among other things, that vaccination coverage is nearly universal in Tigray with single digit percentages in the “no coverage” category. In Afar Region nearly two-fifths of infants and children (38.8%) are in this category. Overall, the neighboring administrative region of Tigray has much higher health coverage than Afar.

	BCG	DPT1	DPT2	DPT3	Polio0	Polio1	Polio2	Polio3	Measles	All	None
Afar	27.6	13.5	8.7	2.8	4.6	58.2	36.9	19.9	8.1	0.6	38.8
Tigray	77.4	85.9	70.9	51.6	19.6	89.8	77.3	56.6	63.3	32.9	7.2

Afar has the second highest proportion of women (83%) with no access to health professionals or trained traditional birth attendants, or other institutional help, during pregnancy and childbirth. Almost 96 percent of Afar women gave birth at home. About 43% of the births were attended by traditional birth attendants, and another 50% by relatives.

A third of Afar women (33%) are classified as thin (BMI less than 18.5) and over 90% of are “circumcised”, 85% have at least one daughter “circumcised” (the highest percentage of any administrative region)

85.4% of Afar women know about, or have heard of HIV/AIDS and 36% knew that HIV can be transmitted from mother to child. These numbers represent the lowest and second lowest proportions of women with such knowledge in Ethiopia.

48% of Afar men are either current users of tobacco, or have used it in the past; the highest in the country.

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