

Volcanoes of the Afar triangle, Ethiopia

Dereje Ayalew

Department of Earth Sciences

School of Earth and Planetary Sciences

Addis Ababa University

Ethiopia, located in the horn of Africa, is one of the most ancient countries in the world. It is the third most populous nation in Africa with over 70 million people and the tenth largest by area. The capital is Addis Ababa. Though most African countries are far less than a century old, Ethiopia has been an independent country since ancient times. A monarchical state for most of its history, the Ethiopian dynasty traces its roots to the 10th century BC. In 1974, the dynasty led by Haile Selassie was overthrown. Since then, Ethiopia has been a secular state. Ethiopia is one of the oldest sites of humanity's oldest traces. Ethiopia was one of only two countries that retained its independence. It was one of only three African members of the League of Nations. When other African nations received their independence following World War II, many of them adopted the colors of Ethiopia's flag, and Addis Ababa became the location of several international organizations focused on Africa. Today, Addis Ababa is still the site of the headquarters of the African Union and UNECA (Economic Commission for Africa). Ethiopia is the only African country with its own alphabet. Ethiopia also has its own time system and unique calendar, seven to eight years behind the Gregorian Calendar. Ethiopia is the source of over 85% of the total Nile waters flow. A land of natural contrasts, Ethiopia has some of Africa's highest mountains as well as some of the world's lowest points below sea level. There are altogether around 80 different ethnic groups in Ethiopia today, with the two largest being the Oromo and the Amhara, both of which speak

Afro-Asiatic languages. The country is also famous for its Olympic gold medalists, rock-hewn churches and as the place where the coffee bean originated. Ethiopia was one of the first Christian countries in the world, having officially adopted Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century. It still has a Christian majority, but a third of the population is Muslim. Ethiopia is the site of the first hijra in Islamic history and the oldest Muslim settlement in Africa at Negash. Until the 1980s, a substantial population of Ethiopian Jews resided in Ethiopia. The country is also the spiritual homeland of the Rastafari religious movement.

The Afar Depression is the product of a tectonic triple junction (the Afar Triple Junction), where the spreading ridges that form the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden emerge on land and meet the East African Rift. The Afar Depression is one of two places on Earth where a mid-ocean ridge can be studied on land, the other being Iceland. In the Depression, the Earth's crust is slowly rifting apart at a rate of 1–2 centimetres (0.3–0.8 in) per year along each of the three rifts. Since late 2005 a continuous sequence of earthquakes, volcanic eruption, fissures hundreds of metres long and deep appearing in the ground, and the valley floor sinking as much as 100 metres. Molten rock was injected into the plate along a dyke between depths of 2 and 9 km, forcing open an 8 meter wide gap on the surface. The floor of the Afar Depression is composed of lava, mostly basalt. One of Earth's great active volcanoes, Erta Ale, is found here. The Afar Depression is underlain by a mantle plume.