TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

pcgn
The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

Eritrea

Country name	Eritrea
State title	State of Eritrea
Name of citizen	Eritrean
National language	Tigrinya (tir)[1]
Country name in national language	ኤርትራ (Iertra)
State title in national language	ሃገረ ኤርትራ (Hagere Iertra)
Script	Tigrinya (sometimes seen as Ge'ez or Ethiopic script[2])
Romanization System	BGN/PCGN Tigrinya Romanization System, 2007
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	ER/ERI
Capital (Conventional name)	Asmara[3]
Capital in official language (romanized in brackets)	አስመራ (Asmera)
Population	c.3.5 million[4]

Introduction

Eritrea is in the Horn of Africa and has a long coastline on the Red Sea. It is similar in size to North Korea and Malawi. Eritrea gained independence in 1993 after 30 years of Ethiopian annexation, and prior to this had seen periods of Italian and British administration. It has international boundaries with Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti.

Geographical names policy

It is BGN/PCGN policy for names in Eritrea to provide Tigrinya spellings where possible; and Tigrinya script geographical names should be romanized according to the BGN/PCGN Romanization System for Tigrinya, 2007. However, given a dearth of available source information, Tigrinya-language sources may have to be supplemented with pre-Eritrean independence Ethiopian sources (which will usually be in Amharic) or even colonial-era sources.

PCGN's best Tigrinya source is a two volume Tigrinya-English dictionary[5]; PCGN has extracted the geographical names from this source, romanized them according to the BGN/PCGN romanization system, and compiled a short gazetteer (approximately 1000 names). This is available on request.

---

[1] ISO 639 codes, where they exist and where deemed useful, are given for languages mentioned in this Factfile.

[2] Ge'ez (or Ethiopic) is a group name for a number of alphabets, including Tigrinya and Amharic: they are 'abugida' scripts, in which each character carries an inherent vowel (e.g. በ = 'ba'; ቡ = 'be')

[3] Given the visual similarity between the conventional and romanized version, PCGN usually recommends simply using the romanized form on maps. The conventional name can be used in English text.

[4] UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020 estimate; it should be noted that population estimates differ significantly.

[5] *Tigrinya-English dictionary*, Thomas Leiper Kane, Dunwoody Press, Springfield, VA, 2000.

Languages

Official languages

There are no official languages in Eritrea, rather, the 1997 Constitution established the equality of all Eritrean languages. Education at primary level is encouraged to be carried out in the mother-tongue language (see 'other languages' below), with English being used thereafter. Though they do not have official status, Tigrinya (*tir*), English (*eng*) and Arabic (*ara*) could be considered 'national' languages.

Knowledge of foreign languages

The influence of both British and Italian administrations in the first half of the 20th century remains evident. English continues to be widely used in education, commerce and government and some older Eritreans can still speak Italian. Arabic is also quite widespread, both for some as a mother tongue and more widely as an additional language. Many also speak Amharic, a legacy of Ethiopian administration in the latter half of the 20th century; Amharic is a Semitic language related to Tigrinya and Tigre and, as Tigrinya, uses the Ge'ez script.

Other languages and dialects

There are nine significant ethno-linguistic groups in Eritrea, comprising the Semitic, Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan language families. The most populous ethnic groups are Tigrinya and Tigre (Semitic language family), together comprising perhaps 80% of the population.

The remaining minority languages are Arabic (1%, Semitic family) spoken by the Rashaida; Saho (5%), Afar (5%), Bedawiyet (4%) and Blin/Bilen (2%) (Cushitic family) and Kunama (3%) and Nara (2%) (Nilo-Saharan family).

Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings[6]):

The **BGN/PCGN romanization system for Tigrinya** contains the following letter-diacritic combinations in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script:

Upper-case character	Unicode encoding	Lower-case character	Unicode encoding
Ĭ	012C	ĭ	012D
Ḥ	0048+0323*	ḥ	0068+0323*
'	2019	'	2018

      *Not available as a single code point.

---

[6] See www.unicode.org Characters can be manually input into Microsoft Word documents by typing in these character codes and then holding down the ALT key and pressing /x/. The code will change to the required character. The letter can be copied and pasted into other programmes if required. Alternatively, the 'Insert – Symbol' command can be used; the code can be entered into the 'Character code' box which will show the corresponding letter. A GeoNames Soft-Copy Keyboard can be downloaded from the NGA website and used to enter the required letter-diacritic combinations for a particular region: http://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/gns_services.html

Administrative structure

At first-order administrative level (ADM1), Eritrea is divided into six ዞባ (Tigrinya: *zoba)* (regions). The regions and their administrative centres are listed in the table below. As English is also spoken widely in Eritrea, the English description of the region names is given in brackets, as are the conventional names of the centres where appropriate. PCGN often recommends including these bracketed references on maps.

These regions are further sub-divided into sub-regions at second-order level (ADM2) and then villages as ADM3s.

Region name in Tigrinya	Region name (romanized, with anglicisation as appropriate)	Centre name in Tigrinya	Centre name (romanized with conventional as appropriate)	Location of centre
ዓንስባ	'Anseba	ከረን	Keren	15° 46' 41" N, 038° 27' 04" E
ደቡብ	Debub (South)	መንደፈራ	Mendefera	14° 53' 14" N, 038° 48' 55" E
ደቡባዊ ቀይሕ ባሕሪ	Debubawi K'eyyĭḥ Baḥri (Southern Red Sea)	ዓስብ	'Aseb (Assab)	13° 00' 33" N, 042° 44' 22" E
ጋሽ ባርካ	Gash Barka	ባረንቱ	Barentu	15° 06' 21" N, 037° 35' 26" E
ማእከል	Ma'ĭkel (Centre)	አስመራ	Asmera (Asmara)[3]	15° 20' 17" N, 038° 55' 55" E
ሰሜናዊ ቀይሕ ባሕሪ	Semienawi K'eyyĭḥ Baḥri (Northern Red Sea)	ምጽዋ	Mĭts'ĭwwa (Massawa)	15° 36' 29" N, 039° 28' 28" E

Other Significant Locations

PCGN recommended name	Name in script and romanization	Location	Feature type
Badme	ባድመ (Badme)	14°43'39"N, 037°48'11"E	town
Dahlak Archipelago	ዳህላክ (Dahlak)[7]	15°50'00"N, 40°12'00"E	islands
Danakil Desert[8]	*Not known*	14°14'30"N, 40°18'00"E	desert
Hanish Islands[9]	جزر حنيش (Juzur Ḥanīsh) *[Arabic name]*	13°45'00"N, 42°45'00"E	islands
Nak'fa	ናቅፋ (Nak'fa)[10]	16°39'54"N, 38°28'35"E	town[11]
Red Sea	ቀይሕ ባሕሪ (K'eyyĭḥ Baḥri)	19°00'00"N, 039°30'00"E	sea

Commonly occurring geographical terms and compass points

Tigrinya	Romanization and translation
ዓዲ	'Addi (common element in place-names, usually meaning village/district)

---

[7] No generic term included in Tigrinya dictionary.

[8] The desert covers part of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. The Danakil Depression, within the desert and one of the lowest and hottest places on earth, is usually considered as lying solely within Ethiopia.

[9] Subject of a former dispute between Yemen and Eritrea, resolved largely in favour of Yemen.

[10] Sometimes seen in script as Nakh'fa (ናኽፋ)

[11] A culturally significant town that gives its name to Eritrea's currency.

Tigrinya	Romanization and translation
ባሕሪ	Baḥri (sea)
ደቡብ	Debub (south)
ደሴት	Desiet (island)
ቀይሕ	K'eyyïḥ (red)
ማእከል	Ma'ïkel (centre)
መርሳ	Mersa (harbour)
ምብራቕ	Mïbrak' (east)
ምዕራብ	Mï'rab (west)
ስቖር	Sekh'ir (small)
ሰሜን	Semien (north)
ዞባ	Zoba (region, district)

Territorial and boundary issues

After the long war of secession, resulting in Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia and Eritrea were at war again 1998-2000. The war centred on the boundary between the two countries, focussing most keenly on the border town of Badme (14° 43' 39" N, 037° 48' 11" E). The UN-founded Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) ruled in favour of Eritrea in 2002, and a subsequent demarcation phase concluded in 2007, though no peace agreement was signed until 2018 and it is believed that Ethiopia still occupies the town.

Useful references

- BBC Country Profile: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078
- BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Tigrinya
- CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/
- Constitution of Eritrea, 23 May 1997, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dd8aa904.html [accessed 17 December 2020]
- Ethnologue: http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=ER (for information on languages)
- FCDO Travel Advice: https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/eritrea
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Online Browsing Platform (OBP): https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/
- Omniglot: www.omniglot.com (for information on languages and scripts)
- PCGN Country Names list: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names
- Statoids: http://www.statoids.com (for information on administrative divisions)
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server (GNS): http://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/

Compiled by PCGN
Tel. 0207 591 3120
info@pcgn.org.uk
www.gov.uk/pcgn
January 2021