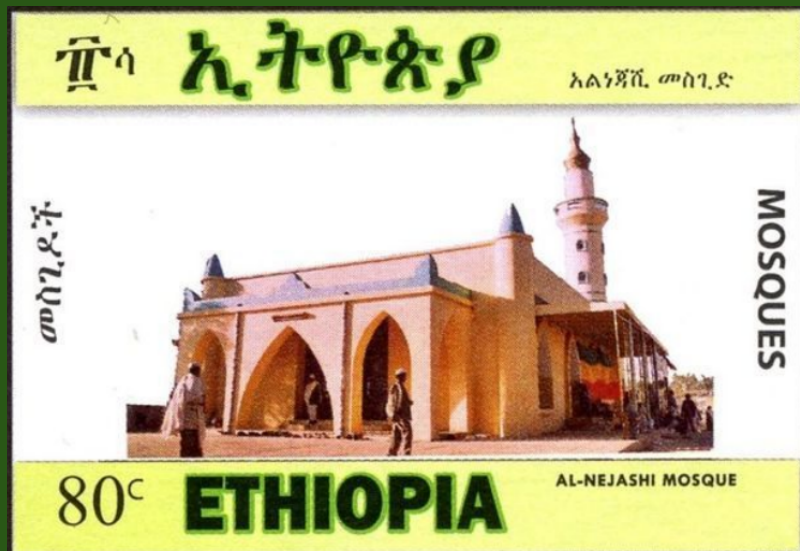


# Islam in Tigray

EXPLAINED .....>

# Islam in Tigray



- Orthodox Christianity was the official state religion of Ethiopia until the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.
- Despite the historical identification of Ethiopia with (Orthodox) Christianity, Islam in Ethiopia is as old as Islam itself.
- Islam first arrived in the northern region of Tigray in 615 A.D., when the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) sent his companions (the Sahaba) from Mecca to Aksum, where “a righteous Christian King,” known as “Nejashi” would provide protection from religious persecution.
- Islam in Tigray is the first recorded example of peaceful religious co-existence, and the site of one of the first mosques in the world, holding revered significance to the people of East Africa and Muslims across the globe.

# Aksum's Queen of Sheba and Israel's King Solomon in the Quran (Surah Al-Naml)



- The Queen of Sheba is a historic figure, who appears in the Quran and the Bible, as well as the centuries old Ethiopian literature known as Kebra Negast.
- In the Ethiopian context, the Queen of Sheba, known as Makeda, is depicted to have ruled over the Kingdom of Aksum (present day Tigray and Eritrea) and to have given birth to King Solomon of Israel's son, Menelik I, the first king in the so-called Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopia.
- In the Quran, the Queen of Sheba (known as Bilqis in Arabic), is depicted as a queen of great stature, prestige, as well as a peer to King Solomon, although there is no record of her bearing his child.
- The following excerpt from the Quran, describes the Queen of Sheba as a respected leader who valued the opinion of her people, and whose leadership style was one of wisdom, charisma, and mutual-respect. The people of the Aksumite Kingdom were recorded as saying:

**“We are men of strength and of great military might, but the command is yours, so see what you will command.” — Saheeh International (Quran Surah 27, Verse 33)**

# The First Hijra (Pilgrimage)

## The Prophet Muhammad's Followers Seek Refuge in Aksum (615 A.D.)

- When the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced religious persecution in Mecca, he advised his followers, including his daughter and cousins, to migrate across the sea to the capital of Aksum in present-day Tigray, where a righteous Christian king would offer protection. In Islam this is known as the First Hijra (Pilgrimage).
- The rulers of Mecca (the Quraish) sent lavish gifts and delegations, to persuade the King to expel and return the Muslims. However, the King refused, saying, "Even if you have given a mountain of gold, I would not give up these people who have taken asylum with me."
- It is said that when the King asked the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, Ja'far, for any revelation that the prophet had from God, he recited a verse in the Quran relating to Mary and the story of Jesus: "And make mention of Mary in the Book (Quran), when [...] We sent unto her Our Spirit, and it appeared unto her in the likeness of a perfect man."
- After hearing this verse, the King vowed that Muslims would be able to seek refuge in Aksum for as long as needed, and with the freedom to practice their faith peacefully.
- When the King died, the Prophet Muhammad mourned his death, by leading his followers in a funeral prayer (Janazah) in absentia, typically reserved for Muslims.



# Tigray: The Land of Protection (Dar al-Hiyad) and Acceptance of Religious Freedom



- When the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) passed away in 632 A.D., the Aksumite Empire was given a special name, Dar al-Hiyad: **the land of protection.**
- Belonging to neither the “Realm of Islam” (*dâr al-islâm*) nor the “Realm of Conquest” (*dâr al-harb*), at a time when all countries of the Red Sea region were under conquest, **Abyssinia became the only region assigned its own domain, the “Realm of Neutrality/Protection” (*dâr al-hiyâd*).** Reverence for the region still exists today.
- The Kingdom of Aksum’s impact on the broader region’s acceptance of religious freedom, and the practice of Islam, is evident and tangible.
- Great historical places of worship and cosmopolitan centers of trade arose in the centuries following the introduction of Islam in the Horn of Africa.
- By the 19th century, various prosperous Islamic kingdoms and states emerged in the periphery of Abyssinia: The Kingdom of Jimma (and the Oromo Gibe states) in the southwest, the sultanates of the Gurage in the south as well as the revitalized state of Harar in the east.

# Modern History: Islam in the Empire of Ethiopia

- A dark moment in Ethiopian Muslim history is the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie who, after the Italian occupation, launched campaigns that forcefully converted almost 20,000 Muslims to Orthodox Christianity:
  - In Tigray and across the country, the Emperor placed limits on the social mobility of Muslims, including rights to land, educational opportunities, religious practice, and political participation.
  - According to the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Haile Selassie stated that "Axum will not allow a mosque while there is no church in Mecca." -- Travel to and from Ethiopia, 2011.
  - Although Haile Selassie made some concessions, including the establishment of Islamic courts to settle family disputes, the sentiment of second-class citizenship remained.
- In March of 1974, a few months prior to Haile Selassie's overthrow, Muslims demonstrated in Addis Ababa, like many other groups, to demand equal rights.

# Modern History: Islam Under the Derg and EPRDF

- Under the military dictatorship of the Derg, the Muslim community saw some of their demands met.
- This was short lived, however, as Mengistu Hailemariam's regime took an anti-religious turn as it led the country through a brutal and oppressive period of civil war (1974-1991), with the most bloodshed occurring during the Red Terror (1976-1977).
- Upon the overthrow of the Derg, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) advanced freedoms of religious expression and practice.
  - Article 27 of the newly written 1995 Constitution allowed for the "establish[ment of] institutions of religious education and administration in order to propagate and organize their religion," while requiring the separation of church and state, and the prohibition of religious discrimination.
  - As a result, Muslims under the EPRDF finally saw the official recognition of Muslim holidays and festivals, the construction of mosques and scholarly institutions, and the preservation of Islamic heritage sites. *Hajj* travel restrictions were also lifted.





# Al-Nejashi Mosque: An Ancient Islamic Heritage Site at Risk



- Tigray's Al-Nejashi heritage site is home to one of the first mosques in the world, built in the 7th century by the companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who fled from religious persecution in Mecca. The mosque is named after the Aksumite King who gave them refuge.



- The Al-Nejashi mosque, which holds revered significance to the people of East Africa and Muslims across the globe, was struck by heavy artillery in December 2020 and later

looted by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. Eighty Tigrayans were killed while protecting the sacred site from invading forces.

- The military attack left the mosque's dome and minaret, as well as the tombs of 15 companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) damaged. Several historical artifacts are believed to have been stolen, including 13th century manuscripts, books and letters dating as far back as the 7th century.

**“Not only us, but Muslims all over the world are shocked that this happened.” -- Hajj Siraj Mohammed, Manager of Al- Nejashi Mosque.**



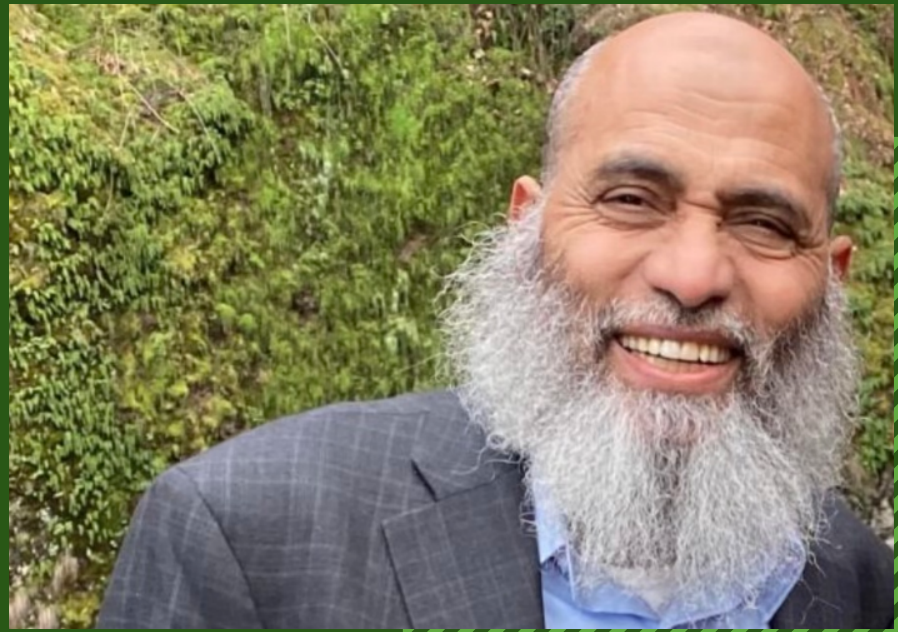
# Call to Protect the Muslim Heritage Sites & People of Tigray

- According to the 2007 census, approximately 4% of Tigrayans are Muslim. However, more recent estimates have found that Muslims make up between 5% to 10% of Tigray's population.
- Throughout time and history, Muslims and Christians have peacefully lived together in Tigray, celebrating a shared Aksumite history representing peace, refuge and religious coexistence.
- The atrocities currently being committed against the people of Tigray, as well as the campaigns to destroy heritage sites and places of worship (that are dear to all Ethiopian Muslims) are hallmarks of genocide.
- Share this post to preserve the history of Muslims in Tigray and Ethiopia as we demand:
  - the immediate cessation of hostilities;
  - the return of all looted religious artifacts;
  - the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Tigray;
  - the unfettered access of humanitarian aid in all areas in Tigray; and
  - that the Ethiopian government hold an all-inclusive national dialogue.

# #PrayForTigray



OMNA  
TIGRAY



**In Loving Memory of Tigrayan Muslim Leaders Who Paved the Way:**  
Ambassador Mufti Mohammed Siraj Saleh (pictured) | Sheikh Abdelwahab Kassa (pictured) | Grasmach Nurhussien Haddush | Sheikh Hizbullah Muhammed Amin

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