



Ethiopians in the New York Metro Area

QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin:
Ethiopia

Significant Subgroups:
Amharic, Oromo, Tigrayan

Location in Metro New York:
Bronx (Parkchester); New Jersey (Jersey City, East Orange)

Population in Metro New York:
7,000 (Community Estimate); 6,481 (ACS 2010 Total Ancestry Reported); 4,425 (ACS 2010 Born in Ethiopia)

Population in New York City:
2,932 (ACS 2010 Total Ancestry Reported); 2,085 (ACS 2010 Born in Ethiopia)

Primary Religion:
Christianity (Ethiopian Orthodox)

Status of Christian Witness:
Greater than 5% evangelical. Less than 10% evangelical.

Primary Languages:
Amharic, Oromo, English

Registry of Peoples Codes:
100293, 110261, 110051

Significant Notes:
Three main theories exist about Ethiopian Jews. One claims they descended from the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Another suggests they are the ancient lost Israelite tribe of Dan. A third believes they are descended from Jews who fled to Egypt after the first destruction of the temple in 586 BC.⁴

The Rastafarian religion (practiced primarily among Jamaicans) believed the late Emperor Haile Selassie I was a reincarnation of Jesus who would usher in prosperity and peace for Africans and the African diaspora. Ethiopians, though, do not practice Rastafarianism.

Monophysitism states that Christ had a "united nature." This was denounced by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, which claimed Christ had both a human and divine nature, known as the "hypostatic union."

ALL PEOPLES INITIATIVE

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"Ethiopia has been called 'the Island of Christianity' in Africa," explained Tekeste, a translator who works with Ethiopian asylum seekers in New York City. "We were one of the first Christian countries in the world, and we have been surrounded by Muslim nations for centuries." Located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia's rich history is a great source of pride for its people. Once known as Abyssinia, Ethiopia is one of the world's ancient countries, and one of two African nations that claim never to have been colonized (although it was occupied by Italy between 1936 and 1941). All three Abrahamic religions have thrived in Ethiopia. How Judaism arrived remains a mystery (see Significant Notes), but Jews have been in Ethiopia for thousands of years. It is believed Christianity was first introduced to Ethiopia by the royal officer who was converted by Philip the Evangelist, as recorded in Acts 8, even though the official adoption of Christianity was in the fourth century. Ethiopia's Islamic history dates back to Mohammed's time in Mecca, when persecuted followers fled to seek refuge in Abyssinia. Modern Ethiopia was shaped by Emperor Haile Selassie, a charismatic leader who came to power in 1930 and made Ethiopia a player on the world stage. However, recurrent droughts, famines, and an ongoing civil war with Eritrean separatists led to his overthrow in 1974. An oppressive Soviet-backed Marxist regime was in power until 1991, when they were ousted by a coalition of rebel groups who formed a new government. An estimated seven thousand Ethiopians now live in Metro New York.¹



Photo by Leah Gonzalez

When Did They Come to New York?

Ethiopians began arriving in Metro New York when the Marxist regime came to power in the 1970s. The 1980 Refugee Act opened the door for thousands who had escaped Ethiopia and were living in Sudan to come to the US as refugees. A border war in the late 1990s with Eritrea created another wave of refugees. While Ethiopians are not currently admitted as refugees, Metro New York's Ethiopian population continues to grow in small numbers through family reunions and a few asylum seekers.

Where Do They Live?

The closest thing Metro New York has to a "Little Ethiopia" is a large concentration of Ethiopians living in the Parkchester condominium complex in southeast Bronx. Smaller groups are located in Jersey City and the St. Cloud section of East Orange, New Jersey, while others are scattered throughout Metro New York. Ethiopian cuisine has gained a foothold among New Yorkers, and at least a dozen restaurants, some quite trendy, can be found throughout the area.

What Do They Believe?

"The service is long, especially when you don't know what they are saying. Then it's extra long!" That is how Adel, a young Ethiopian man, described the three-hour Mass to a visiting *New York Times* reporter.² The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church—the spiritual home of the vast majority of Ethiopians in Metro New York—grew out of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, which split from the Roman Catholic Church over the issue of monophysitism (see Significant Notes). There are six Ethiopian Orthodox Churches in Metro New York, and their services are highly ritualistic and often given in Ge'ez, a "dead" liturgical language. The church venerates Mary and places a heavy emphasis on Old Testament teachings, requiring followers to adhere to Jewish dietary laws and other practices. Up to ten percent of Ethiopians in Metro New York, though, are evangelical Christians, and they have churches in the Bronx, Manhattan, and East Orange, New Jersey. While Ethiopia is one-third Muslim, only a small number of Ethiopian Muslims live in Metro New York.³

What Are Their Lives Like?

"Even here, we feel the ethnic tensions created by the current Ethiopian government," explained Ms. Asrat, a community leader who works with Ethiopian youth. Ethiopia has recently been divided into "ethnic states," resulting in power imbalances among groups. In Metro New York, the most friction is felt between the Amharic people (Ethiopia's "ruling class" and immigrant majority) and the Oromo (one of the most populous groups in Ethiopia). In fact, some Oromo will not call themselves Ethiopian and refuse to speak Amharic, the national language.

How Can I Pray?

∞ Pray that Ethiopians would go beyond ritualistic faith and seek a personal relationship with Christ.

∞ Pray for believers to be strong evangelists like Philip and teach God's Word with power.

1. Estimate provided by Abyanesh Asrat, an Ethiopian community leader and philanthropist, in a personal interview on August 8, 2009.
2. Jennifer Bleyer, "The Next Wave: Scenes; First the Mass, Then the Fellowship," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2004, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B07E7D8113FF932A15752C1A9629C8B63> (accessed January 9, 2010).
3. Central Intelligence Agency, "Ethiopia," *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).
4. Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, "Ethiopian Jewry," History, http://www.iaej.co.il/pages/history_in_the_beginning.htm (accessed January 11, 2010).