

Eritrea: The Rashaida People

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The Rashaida people of Eritrea

Population: 80-100,000 in Eritrea

Religion: Sunni Islam

Language: Arabic



Photo by Johan Gerrits - Rashaida siblings near Massawa

The Rashaida migrated to Eritrea and north-eastern Sudan from Saudi Arabia in 1846. (2007, Amal Hassan Fadlalla, p.44). The cause of their migration was due to ethnic warfare breaking out in Saudi Arabia (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177). The Rashaida are thought to be related to the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia and are the only true nomadic people left in Eritrea (Matt Phillips, P.302). They are primarily Muslim, and very few Christians are known to exist among the group (2005, Mohamed Fadlalla, P. 20). According to the Eritrean government, the Rashaida made up 2.4% of Eritrea's population, and numbered around 78,000 in 1996 (see table chart below). The language spoken by them is Arabic (1996, Kjetil Tronvoll, P. 27), although some are capable in speaking Tigre. According to Kjetil Tronvoll, the Rashaida name means "refugee" (1996, Kjetil Tronvoll, P. 27).



The Rashaida are a nomadic people who live in tents made of goatskins (2005, Mohamed Fadlalla, P. 20). They are herdsman, primarily breeding goats and sheep, since they are largely illiterate, they memorize in great detail the pedigree of their animals, keeping mental records of their herds over seven or eight generations of the flock, although they usually only emphasize the female lines (2005, Mohamed Fadlalla, P. 20). Besides herding, the Rashaida also earn income by making jewellery (2005, Mohamed Fadlalla, P. 20).

Rashaida women are famous for their black-and-red geometrically patterned dresses, and their burkas (long, heavy veils) elaborately embroidered with silver thread, beads and sometimes seed pearls (2006, Matt Phillips, P.302). Once a Rashaida girl reaches the age of 5, she is required to wear a veil that covers most of her face, with the exception of her eyes (Jane Perlez, New York Times). Since the sexes do not mix freely in Rashaida culture, young men and women have few chances to meet of their own accord. As a result, marriages are usually arranged by families (2002, Carol Beckwith, P.142). However, if a Rashadian girl is ready to marry, she will at times approach the man she wants and flirtatiously lift her veil so that he can see her chin. If he accepts her offer he must find 100 camels for her bride price (2007, Patricia Levy, 64).



During the Italian period in Eritrea, it was largely uneventful for the Rashaida as the areas normally inhabited by them were extremely harsh and at considerable distance from active reach of the state (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177). The combination of animal-herding, occasional agriculture, and trade allowed the Rashaida to attain considerable prosperity, consisting mainly of large animal herds and gold stores (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177). However, during the Ethiopian occupation of Eritrea (1950-1991), much of this wealth was destroyed. The Rashaida were a favorite target of the Ethiopian army because of their prosperity (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177). Their nomadic lifestyle also attracted the suspicion of the Ethiopian army, which punished them repeatedly for supporting the Eritrean liberation fronts (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177). Consequently, the Rashaida entered the post independence period greatly impoverished (1998, Niaz Murtaza, P. 177).

Since Eritrea won its independence in 1991, the Eritrean government has been asking the Rashaida to transform themselves into settled agriculturists. A large piece of land has been set aside near Sheeb (pronounced sheb), a village more than 35 miles northwest of Massawa, for the Rashaida people of the region to settle. The idea is to provide schools and health clinics for a people who have never known such things (Jane Perlez, New York Times).

Table 1.
Eritrean population by ethnic group

| Ethnic group | Population | Percentage |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| Afar | 160,000 | 6.0 |
| Bilen | 64,000 | 2.0 |
| Hedareb | 80,000 | 2.5 |
| Kunama | 64,000 | 2.0 |
| Nara | 48,000 | 1.5 |
| Rashida | 76,000 | 2.4 |
| Saho | 160,000 | 5.0 |
| Tigre | 992,000 | 31.0 |
| Tigrinya | 1,600,000 | 50.0 |
| Total | 3,200,000 | 100 |

Source: Planning Office, Ministry of Education, Asmara, Eritrea, 1996 (cited from Woldemikael 2003: 120)

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