

## **Zeinab Badawi:**

“...through the Lens of History, you Will see that Eritrea was the Heart of an Amazing and Highly Sophisticated Civilization”



Sabrina Solomon

*We have an honourable guest today, Zeinab Badawi, a prominent media and academic figure known for her insightful commentary on global affairs and commitment to promoting understanding of African issues. Zeinab Badawi is a Sudanese-British award-winning journalist and broadcaster, best known for her work at the BBC, where she presented programs such as “Hard Talk” and “Global Questions” on BBC World News. She previously co-presented Channel 4 News with Jon Snow and began her career as a broadcast journalist for Yorkshire Television and BBC Manchester. Currently serving as the President of SOAS, University of London, Zeinab studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford, and holds a Master’s Degree in History from the School of Oriental and African Studies. Zeinab has been a recipient of numerous awards for her journalism, including an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire). She recently had a trip to Eritrea to conduct deeper research on the ancient history of Eritrea. Here is the interview we conducted with her.*

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*Your recent book on African history likely provides valuable context for understanding contemporary African issues. How do the historical narratives you explore in your book*

*relate to the current situation in Eritrea, particularly in terms of its relationship with the international community?*



So I always say that to understand the present, you've got to understand the past. Because a lot of people think that history explains the past, but it also forms the present and helps shape the future. This is why I embarked on my mission of trying to relate Africa's history from an African perspective, as that was the other thing that's important to me: that the ownership of the narrative must belong to the people. So, if you're in Eritrea, you've got to listen to the Eritrean historians, archaeologists, palaeontologists, and museum directors, as they are the ones who should be custodians of their history. It wasn't a history of countries because I go back to the far reaches of time, and of course, there weren't many countries in Africa as most were created in 1885 during the Berlin Conference. So, in terms of Eritrea specifically, I think for a country that gained independence in 1991, it will be embarking on the journey of shaping its own narrative about its history. And, of course, when you get your independence, there are many competing interests. You've got to build a nation, you've got to provide the services that your people demand, especially after a long war, and so culture and history can often get relegated to the bottom. But I think now that it's 35 years or so since Eritrea became independent, I would love to see the people of Eritrea embrace its amazing history.

*Given your expertise as an award-winning journalist and your focus on African history, how do you perceive the current narrative surrounding Eritrea in international media, and what are the key biases you observe?*

I think the main thing I would say is that most people don't know anything about Eritrea. Because it's not a country that many people have visited, and therefore, I would love to make a documentary film which is about the hidden treasures of Eritrea. My focus is very much on

the marvellous archaeological sites, maritime history with the great ancient city of Adulis, and that kind of thing. And I think it would be a real eye-opener to many people when they just discover how rich and deep the history of Eritrea is. I would hope that it would lead to a greater engagement between Eritrea, Eritreans, and the rest of the world.



***During your visit, you had the opportunity to engage with government officials and UN officials. What were the key takeaways from these discussions, and how do they align with or diverge from the prevailing narratives about Eritrea?***

I've essentially been invited here under the auspices of the United Nations. And it's been a marvellous visit. I had the opportunity to meet the President, some Government Ministers as well as UN Agencies that are based here in Eritrea, like UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Health Organization, and so on. And I think that what I hear from the UN Agencies is that, of course, there's a great deal of work that needs to be done to deliver the kinds of services that the people of Eritrea expect in terms of power supply etc. But it just seems to me that a lot of them are saying that in terms of the engagement that they have with the authorities here in Eritrea, they are, by and large, managing to operate and deliver the programs that they want to in conjunction with the Eritrean government, with the government being very much in the driving seat.

***You visited several cultural, historical, and archaeological sites in Eritrea. How do these sites contribute to our understanding of Eritrea's rich history and place in Africa?***

I think the great port of Adulis, which is about 55 kilometres from Massawa, was one of the main port cities in the ancient world. There's no question of that. And excavations that are taking place now show that a lot of the archaeological finds suggest that it was in operation at

least 2,000 years ago. But you know from ancient history and research that I have done that Queen Hatshepsut in ancient Egypt, around 1500 BCE, embarked on trading missions with what was the Land of Punt, and Adulis was very much part of the latter. It comprises Eritrea today and bits of Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, which is what most people think.



But there is no question that there was a thriving and flourishing civilization at Adulis, probably with its own king (an Adulite king), very different from the Axumite king, and the Axumites of course used Adulis as their main trading centre. And all sorts of things went through there, like ivory and gold in the region. At the site, we have found exquisite ceramics, glassware, and this shows you that what we now call Eritrea today was at the heart of this trade hive because Eritrea today has a strong card in its hand as it has got more than 1,000 kilometres of coastline along the Red Sea with the Bab-el-Mandeb, and so it's a very strategically placed country. And history tells us that it was strategically very important until about the 800s AD, where Jeddah (today's Saudi Arabia) became the main point on the Red Sea. Environmental factors and rivalries contributed to the decline of Adulis. So, I think that people may today look at Eritrea and see it in a certain way, but if you go back and look at it through the lens of history, you will see that it was the heart of an amazing and highly sophisticated civilization.

***What role do you believe intellectuals, journalists, and academics like yourself can play in challenging these biased narratives and promoting a more nuanced understanding of Eritrea?***

I think now, not just Eritrea, but the whole of Africa has to some extent been misunderstood by the outside world. I think that a lot of people who don't know Africa tend to see it through the lens of wars and famine, and that's all they think exists in Africa. And that's why I

embarked on this mission, both for the TV series (20-25-minute films) and the book I wrote about African history, to try to set the record straight, to say to people out there that Africa and African countries, including Eritrea, have history, traditions, culture, institutions that are worthy of research, study, and knowledge. It is so important that we put the African intellectuals in the driving seat when it comes to relaying these narratives to this outside world because for too long, Africa's story has been told by outsiders.



And I believe that if you only look at Africa through the lens of the West, you will miss many things as you won't get an inclusive picture. And history and understanding are best enhanced when they are more diverse. And it's not about supplanting but is about supplementing the narratives that we have to fill in the vacuums. And I think that when people see the natural resources of a country like Eritrea, the beautiful marine coast that you have and the beautiful marine life and wildlife, the forests, and all the amazing archaeological sites in Kohayto, Seneafe, Adulis, and more. Eritrea's ancient history is a story that is being uncovered, and it's a very exciting one.

***What are the overall impressions of your visit to Eritrea? How did your experience on the ground compare with the narratives you had encountered prior to your visit?***

I have to say that this is my second visit to Eritrea. My first visit was quite rushed, as I was traveling to more than 30 African countries over a period of seven years to produce a documentary series and write a book. This time, I've returned without a film crew to conduct more in-depth research, given the significant advancements in scholarship over the past seven or eight years.

This time, my impression is that Eritreans are much more interested in engaging with their ancient past. For instance, during my travels around Massawa, I observed that many of the historical buildings are in a state of disrepair and urgently require renovation to restore their

former glory. On my previous visit, there seemed to be little emphasis on preserving these sites. However, this time, my conversations with people have revealed a growing desire to protect and promote this rich heritage, which is not only Eritrean heritage but also African and global heritage. Everyone's history is enriched by Eritrea's insights, as sites like Massawa offer a unique perspective to the rest of the world. So, this time, there seem to be some plans being put in place to develop the historical and archaeological narrative of the country.”

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