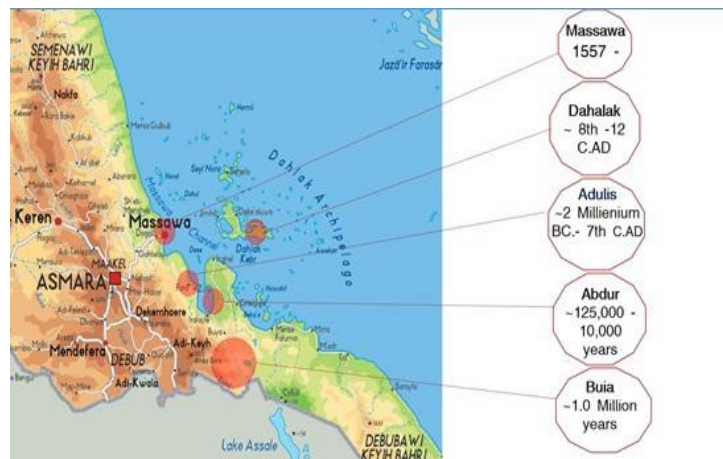


Heritage and Society



Dr. Tsegai Medin

“Heritage is an essential part of the present we live in — and of the future we will build.”

The definition and concept of heritage have been widely discussed and debated by scholars over the years because it is a complex topic. Often, heritage is defined simplistically, with most people associating it merely with one’s place of origin (such as a town or village) or ethnic background. This common understanding overlooks the deeper, more intangible, and cognitive aspects that link heritage to society.

Some researchers argue that heritage cannot be separated from its complex and multifaceted nature because the values people hold influence the heritage they connect with. Others believe that different groups within society interpret heritage through varying value systems. These perspectives help us gain a deeper understanding of the concept and theory of heritage.

In this context, the meaning of heritage may vary. Still, generally, heritage refers to elements associated with a society’s culture—such as traditions, languages, or buildings—that were created in the past and continue to hold historical significance. Heritage typically encompasses the full spectrum of inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and cultural expressions. Heritage isn’t just made of stone, wood, bones, and metals; it is made of breath, song, and skill as

well. Most importantly, heritage includes both ancient and modern activities, meanings, and behaviors that we derive from these elements.



Fossilized tree trunk – AdiKinznab, South region

Whether it is the Qohaito cultural landscape, the Sahaba mosque, the Naqfa military trenches, a rural area, or a town center, the values and meanings they embody are central and remain consistent across different heritage contexts.

Heritage goes beyond merely preserving, excavating, exhibiting, or restoring old artifacts. It is both tangible and intangible, meaning that ideas and memories—such as songs, folklore, recipes, language, dances, and many other aspects of identity—are just as significant as historic buildings and archaeological sites.

Heritage should be a subject of active public reflection, debate, and discussion. Questions arise, such as: What is worth preserving? What should we forget? Which memories can we cherish, regret, or learn from? Who owns “The Past,” and who has the right to represent past generations? Engaging in public conversations about both material and intangible heritage—of individuals, groups, communities, and nations—is an important part of public life in our multicultural world.

Heritage is a living practice with wide-reaching impacts. It can play a role in thoughtful urban and regional planning, serve as a platform for political recognition, facilitate intercultural dialogue, encourage ethical reflection, and provide a foundation for local economic development. It is simultaneously local, global, and shared.

Despite its vivid nature, Eritrea's historic environment remains largely unstudied and underappreciated. The Eritrean people live in an area surrounded by recognized heritage sites, with historic environments accessible to all. For instance, the Sembel and Machihot archaeological sites are located within Asmara; Qohaito lies near the city of Adi-Qeih; Metera is on the outskirts of Senafe; the historic Sahaba mosque is in the center of Massawa, with Adulis just 50 km away; Aqurdad archaeological site in the Gash Barka Region; Elit Area archaeological sites in the Haikota environs; Awalid archaeological site in Anseba Region; and, the Ayumen and Asagala sites in the Southern Red Sea Region. These heritage sites are not only part of daily life but also serve as tangible links to the past, narrating the stories of local places and the nation as a whole.



Adulis – a temple monument

We hold our historic and cultural environments in high regard because they inspire passion, curiosity, and fascination. This appreciation arises from the remarkable history of our society and the deep emotional connection we feel toward it, helping us understand our place in the world and fostering a sense of belonging and attachment to these places.

Visiting historic environments is important for our health and well-being. Increasing evidence shows that these environments play a significant role in supporting and enhancing both our mental and physical health, benefiting individuals and entire communities. Therefore, engaging in domestic tourism—such as visiting natural or cultural landscapes, historical sites, and museums—should be embraced as part of our culture to help promote and deepen our understanding of heritage.

Historic environments foster a strong sense of place, reflecting how people assign meaning and value to specific locations. Such places evoke positive emotions like belonging, identity, and pride.

These environments shape our perception of places. Eritrea's architectural heritage is well-known for its age, aesthetic appeal, beauty, and distinctive character. The variety of local styles and the enduring nature of historic buildings make them an attractive feature of the built environment. Their presence in both rural and urban areas draws people in and positively influences their quality of life.

Historic environments also bring people together, offering appealing spaces for socializing and relaxation and uniting communities around shared interests.



The beauty of our performing arts

Furthermore, historic environments encourage learning and understanding. Engaging with culture helps individuals reflect on themselves and their lives, fosters empathy towards others, and promotes appreciation for the diversity of human experiences and cultures.

To speak of Eritrea is to speak of a land where history is etched into every mountain pass and where the air carries the scent of frankincense and the echoes of ancient civilizations. Eritrea's cultural heritage is not just a collection of artifacts; it is a testament to resilience, diversity, and an unbreakable bond of society with the land.

Eritrea's unique and diverse heritage is the product of millions of years of cultural evolution and social dynamics. This heritage has been passed down through generations and remains vibrant within society today. Cultural and

historical evidence is found throughout the country. We strongly advocate for immediate and sustainable investment in preserving, studying, and promoting this invaluable cultural heritage. Preserving heritage means keeping society's collective memories alive, supporting economic develop.

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