

Awakened by Midnight Chants...

Timkat in Ethiopia

by Debbie Jefkin-Elnekave

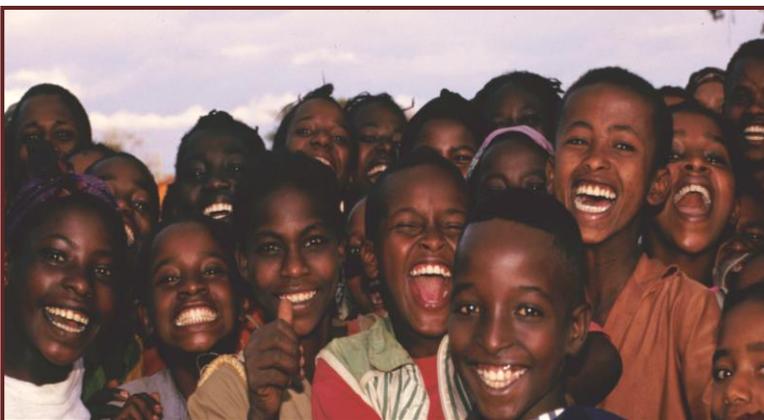
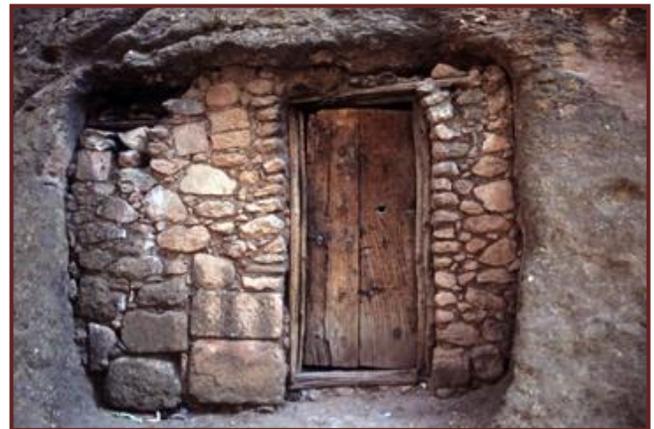


A single candle illuminates the shrouded figures of four small children, bronzing their faces and imbuing them with an angelic quality. They are huddled together in a solemn observance of Timkat, the Ethiopian Orthodox Epiphany, or commemoration of the baptism of Christ. I reflect back on the chaos of yesterday's Epiphany Eve Ketra procession. How different and serene it is this pre-dawn morning of Timkat in Lalibela.

My plan to venture so far off the beaten path was met with undisguised skepticism from my non-traveling friends, who just shook their heads in disbelief and pleaded "*Why Ethiopia?*" With images of the epic 1984 famine burned into our consciousness, Ethiopia is so formidable to the Western mind that we rarely take it into account as a travel destination.

Soft spoken history

Perched at 8,000 feet, Lalibela nestles in the Lasta mountains of the country's central highlands, 300 miles north of the capital of Addis Ababa. The town speaks softly of a bygone era, when it was the populous capital of a 12th century dynasty. The glory days are centuries past, but with its crumbling stucco buildings, unpaved roads and medieval aspect, Lalibela is lovely quite by accident.



It is home to 10,000 gracious people who have no apparent ties outside the village. In spite of their seeming geographic isolation, the children have learned idiom-infused pidgin English from tourists, and devote themselves with boundless persistence to bantering with me. In an attempt to evade yet another iteration of the same robotic dialogue, I tell one young boy that I am from Antarctica. I assume that country doesn't figure into his gamut of geographic and

linguistic expertise, and he will leave me to explore in peace. Undeterred and eager to show off the most recent addition to his repertoire of English phrases, he doesn't skip a beat in retorting, "*You're pushing my leg.*"



Divine intervention

Lalibela is a holy city that traces its origins to King Lalibela, who was born in Roha, on the site of the town which today bears his name. According to legend, a swarm of bees enveloped him at his birth; hence his name, which means “for whom the bees have foretold greatness.” At that time, the throne of the dynasty was occupied by his brother who, fearing the oracle’s prediction would come true, poisoned him. The young prince fell into a coma for three days, but miraculously survived the ordeal. God had Lalibela taken to heaven by angels, then commanded him to return to earth to carve eleven monolithic churches from volcanic rock.

Historians estimate that the churches were built over a hundred year period by Egyptians, but the devout believe they were completed in 24 years with the help of angels. Whichever theory you favor, they stand in testimony to the power of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, which half of Ethiopians still hold today with undiminished vigor. They unquestioningly believe that miracles stem from faith, focused through their saints and holy men. This faith, and the Timkat ceremonies, are the reasons I have come to Lalibela.



Right on schedule

Time in Ethiopia is defined by the Julian calendar, 13 month years and 12 hour days. When the rest of the world celebrated the new millennium, it was 1993 in Ethiopia. Ask a 40 something year old Ethiopian his age, and he will launch into a convoluted algorithm, adding, subtracting, multiplying, and finally coming up with an answer of 17. When my watch tells me it is 8:00, they swear it is 2:00. No wonder the Ethiopian Airlines flights are never on time! The only thing that runs on schedule is the observance of Timkat, like clockwork, on January 19...except this year, because it is a leap year...so it is celebrated instead on January 20.



Twelfth century splendor

The Ketra celebration marks the beginning of Timkat Eve. Priests and deacons emerge from their churches bearing a proud collection of precious icons, sacred manuscripts and ornate processional crosses, which are used to bless worshippers. They fall into procession along the dusty, pocked ribbon of road that winds through town, to the ceremonial grounds several miles away. The focus of this moving centerpiece is the sacrosanct *tabot* – a representation of the Ark of the Covenant. I approach to get a closer look, but the worshippers nearly tackle me to the ground. “*That is the most sacred icon! You cannot go near!*”

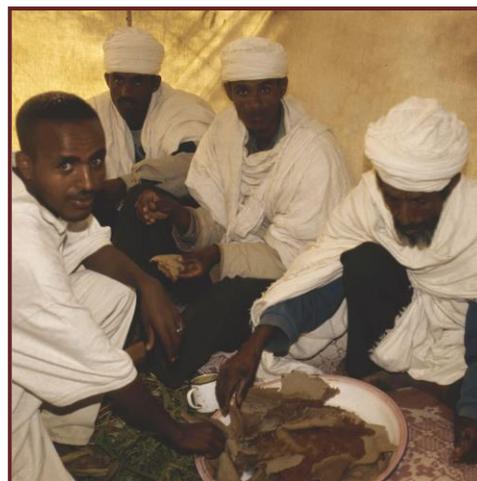
This could be the 12th century. The priests, resplendent in fine brocade vestments, leaning against prayer sticks, are like icons from the medieval past. The streets teem with throngs of pilgrims who move in swarms, and I try to keep up until it is nearly impossible to move, to take even another step. I find an opening in the maelstrom and make my way to the fringe of the crowd, lest I be trampled in a stampede.



The pageant of holy men, worshippers and icons finally converge onto the ceremonial grounds, where the priest begins to perform the mass. Within minutes, the grounds throb with kinetic troupes of dancers, percussive sistrums, beating drums, trilling ululations, and chanting in praise of the deeds of saints. These impromptu festivities both blend and clash with the sanctity of the priest's homily.

When the ceremonies end several hours later, I am not yet ready to return to the hotel, as if doing so will break the festival's magical spell. Instead, I wander the grounds, hoping to connect with the people on a deeper, more personal level. In answer to my unspoken wish, I am whisked away to a tent by a nun. She has a benevolent face and soulful eyes that assure me that any differences in our nationalities, cultural backgrounds or religious beliefs are irrelevant.

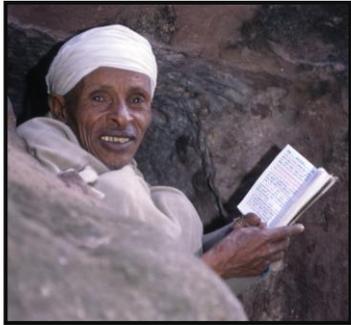
Inside the tent, an assembly of priests, deacons and their families graciously welcomes me into their fold. They offer generous portions of *tej* brewed from sorghum, and *injera*, a spongy, fermented, sour bread with spicy sauce. I carry a state of the art camera, wear the latest in travel apparel and stay at the best hotel in town. Yet they are the ones who give unsparingly of their humble provisions. I sit on a mat, drinking in the local culture and hospitality, along with my *tej*. Although I don't speak Amharic and they don't speak English, there is silent understanding. I hold the greenish, sludge-like wine and pungent *injera* in my hands as tangible symbols of our kindred connection. When all is said and done, this is what I will remember most about my pilgrimage: the open hearts and generosity of these warm and gentle people.



The delicate surface of history

Many devotees maintain an all night vigil to honor the *tabot*. Their chanting continues throughout, and wakes me up at intervals. It is a soothing chant, of this devout congregation softly calling out for God's blessing, like rippling water along a riverbank. I wake up in the morning feeling renewed, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the interludes.

The pre-dawn ceremonial grounds appear like a black and white photograph. They are filled to capacity with adherents on this early Timkat morning. The chaos of yesterday is now tamed, overcome by an unutterable serenity, as if someone

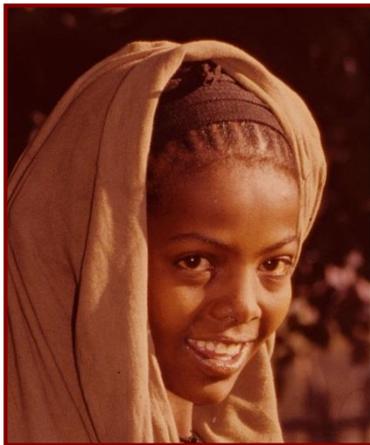


has waved a magic wand over the town. In a scene that can only be described as biblical, flickering

candle light casts a warm glow across the pious faces of men, women and children, each shrouded in a traditional, loosely woven, white muslin *shama*. A few worshippers cast a curious glance my way, but most are so absorbed in prayer that they are indifferent to what is happening around them.



After the sermon I walk to the baptismal font, where followers and icons are anointed with holy water, to commemorate John's baptism of Christ in the River Jordan. Following the benediction, the procession retraces its dusty route, in step with the devout multitudes. The treasured icons are returned to the churches to be safeguarded for another year, under the watchful protection of the priests and deacons. The last worshippers depart, marking the end of Timkat, and the dust settles once again across Lalibela and across the delicate surface of history.



To the skeptics who ask, "*Why Ethiopia?*" I think the answer is obvious. It is ageless, primeval, enduring; an unbroken link with another time and place. The past is kept alive here, as if being in Lalibela allows us to see back through the centuries. There is a certain clarity in watching church elders pass down tradition from one generation to the next, and the spiritual quest of believers affirms my own restless search for "forever" in our fleeting material world. Perhaps I should ask, "*Why not Ethiopia?*"