

TIMKAT IN ETHIOPIA





Celebrating the Baptism of Christ, every January, Timkat is the greatest festival of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia. It celebrates the Baptism of Christ in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. The festivities begin in the 3rd week of January, the day before Epiphany which, according to the Julian calendar, falls on 19th January.



Ethiopia is a very religious country. More than 40% people are orthodox Christians. Timkat is celebrated all over Ethiopia, but nowhere is it quite as spectacular as in Lalibela, an isolated mountain town in the arid north of the country, famous for its rock churches listed by UNESCO.



The eve of Timket is called Ketera. This is when the Tabots of each church are carried out in procession. The Tabot symbolizes the Ark of the Covenant and the tablets of the Law, which Moses received on Mount Sinai.



When the Tabots are carried out, they are wrapped in brocades or velvet "like the mantle of Christ" and carried on the head of the priests.



Some volunteers put red carpets on the path of the priests. Once they walked on it, they roll the carpets, run in front of the priests, and put them again and again.



Epiphany is the 12th day of Christmas, when the three kings were said to have bestowed their gifts upon the baby Jesus. Christianity came to Ethiopia long before it spread to Europe. Missionaries came here within 40 years of the birth of Jesus.



The crowd is dressed in white and come from all over the country. It is also a good time for ethiopians living abroad to come back in their country to celebrate Timkat.



The night before Timkat, people like to come and see the pool that will be used for the ceremony, as tomorrow, the place will be overcrowded...



At night the more fervents and the poorest sleep in front of the tent that welcome the tabots on the eve of the baptism.

There is a smell of alcohol as many drink tej , a honey alcohol, to resist to the cold. Priest pray all night long.



Girls in the night sharing a traditional shawl to protect from the cold, Lalibela is in the highlands of Ethiopia.



On the day of Timkat, all the priests gather to the pool and pray together. As many tourists attend the ceremony, a priest also takes the microphone to explain the process.



The priests are protecting from the sun with colorful umbrellas and carry crosses.



The senior priests use a processional crosses to bless the water of the pool, surrounded by the people who wait for hours for this moment since the dawn.



Everybody wants to see the priests blessing the water...



The priests spray the holy water on the crowd in commemoration of Christ's baptism....



...but the pressure is too high and many of the more fervent leap fully dressed into the water to renew their vows. Some kids also join the celebration, more to enjoy a pool party than a deep religious belief!



Those who do not dare to jump into the pool, collect holy water in bottles and bless their friends or relatives.



After the baptism, the Tabots of each church start their way back to their respective churches. The priests march solemnly under umbrellas in the street.



They are accompanied by groups singing and dancing.



Security was high in Lalibela: demonstrations began in Oromia last november, and have also take place recently in the Amhara region. More than 400 people have been killed in clashes. The Oromos complain that they have been excluded from the political process and the economic development.



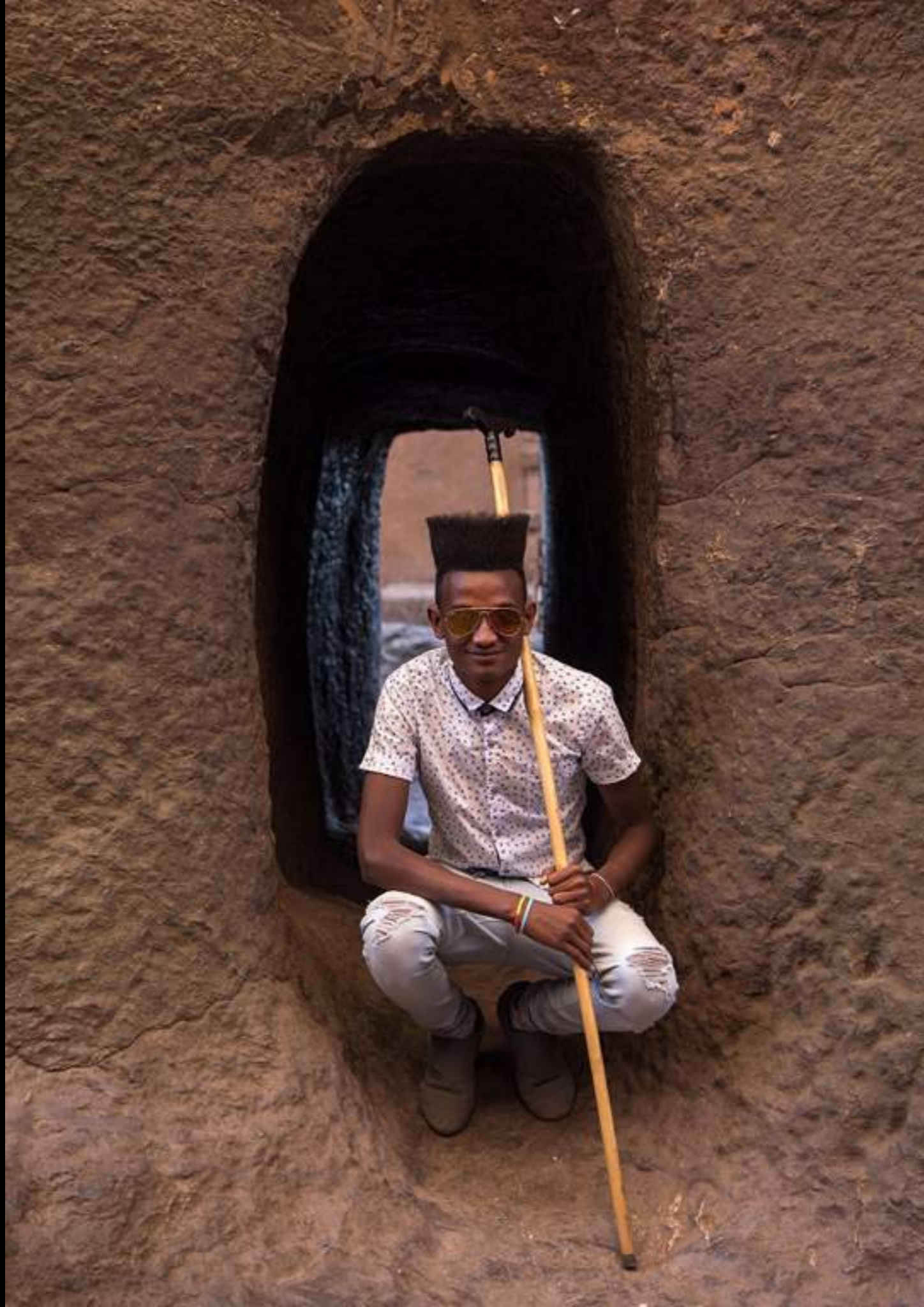
But nothing happened during Timkat and even the young men celebrated stick dances in a peaceful atmosphere.



One of the climax of Timkat is when the priests dance face to face in line. This is a special dance with prayer sticks and sisteras and the beating of drums.



Timkat is a good time to aslo speak and meet priests as many speak english and can explain for example that they can marry and have children in their religion.



Timkat for the young people is also a time to show their best clothes and their best look. This one has made himself a very stylish hairstyle. He visits the rock church of St George.



Timkat is over, the priests go back to their churches while many pilgrims will go home by feet, walking all day long...



One memory of Timkat will remain for one year: the holy water of the pool will be kept in plastic bottles. The people put them on their doors to bring luck and push away bad spirits.

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