Meskel on the Square

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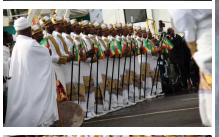
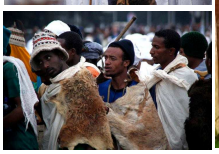
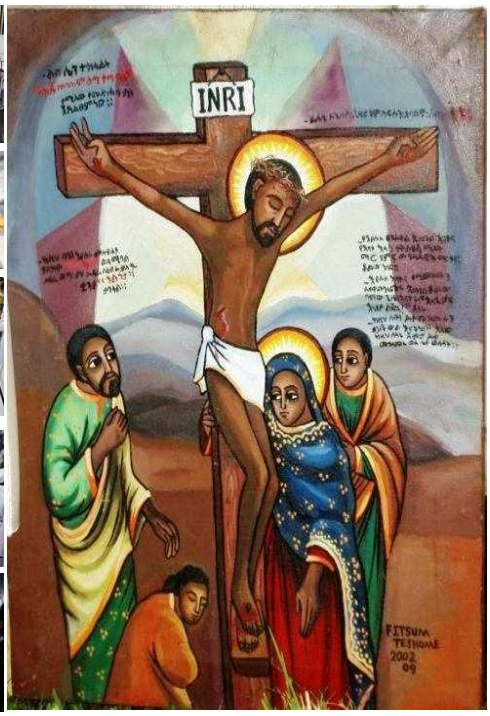
Event







Meskel being an annual celebration with spiritual grounds is held in the 17th of September of each year by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its followers. For centuries, the day has been celebrated and has come to be one of the fundamental holidays of the nation's calendar. As usual this celebration has been celebrated this year on the Meskel Square. We the writers have attended the full ceremony and were excited of what we have seen. And we have reported it all here.

On September 17 of 2011 G.C, the people of Addis Ababa city, most of them Orthodox Christians, went out to all of the streets that lead to the Meskel Square. Not only the followers of the religion that flew into this spacious square but also many other foreigners.

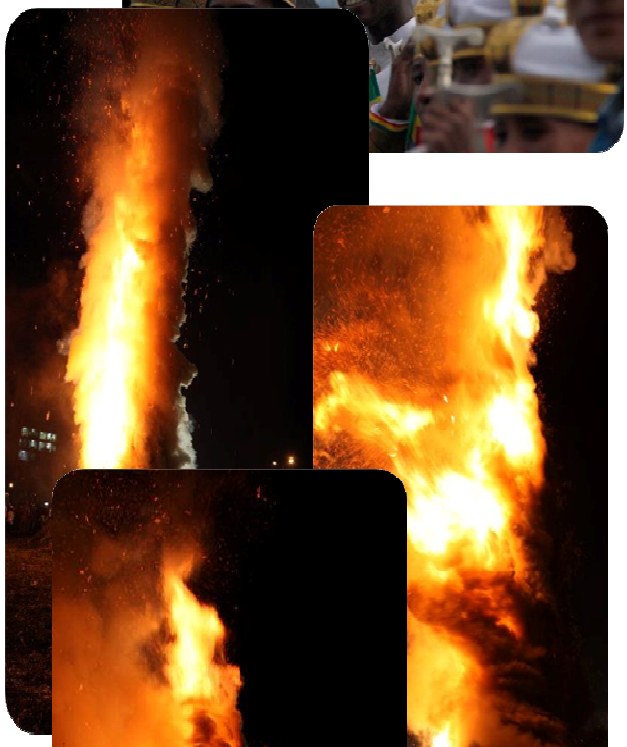
Exceptionally, there was a rainfall while the ceremony was on the go. However, the people did not disperse but even more people were marching to the Square. Some of them had carried umbrellas; most had not. It did not make a difference though. Nobody had a thought of hiding from the rain by getting away from the Square. Not even the foreigners. Saving memories of this great event in their cameras, they, instead, stood there until it was all over; until the great Damara was set on fire and the entire square was lightened up by the light from the great conflagration.

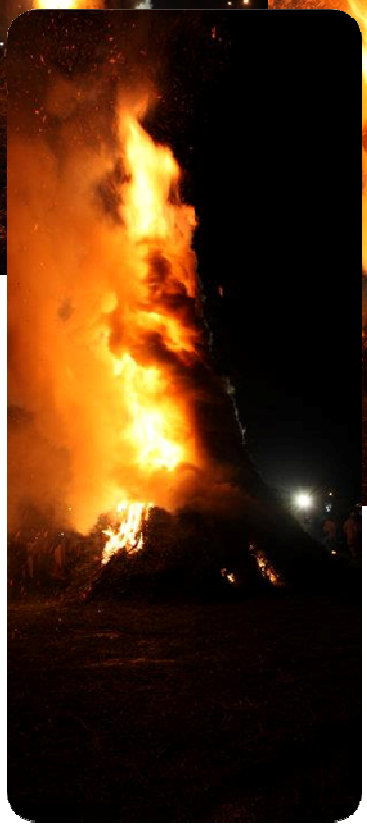
The Gathering

Early at 9 o'clock the people from every direction had started to come to the Square. All of them had on their faces a feeling of excitement and happiness. From that time on up to 12 they kept coming to the square until the entire field had got cramped. Tens of thousands of people attended the ceremony. Many Europeans and others were also unwilling to leave the place instead of the rain that kept falling until all had started to feel as if they were taking a shower.

The Damara

The Damara is the great bundle put together of Chibos. Early in the morning the responsible church for the erection starts putting numerous chibos together until it becomes much enough for the building of the Damara. All passers-by drop a chibo or two on their way to anywhere starting from the morning. When the chibos are accumulated on the centre of the square the represented church starts to construct the Damara. After it was constructed it was covered by flowers named 'Adey Abeba' in Amharic. The flowers' outer circle is bright yellow while its centre is dark-brown. Probably it is one of the 250 species of Aster flower. Finally, the Damara takes this appearance





What does the Damara symbolize?

Queen Eleni of Ethiopia, in 320 A.D, had her journey to Jerusalem. The very drive behind her voyage had been the search for the true cross. Reaching the land of Israel, she could not find the place where the cross had been buried. Hence, she, with the help of many others, collected woods from all the land of Israel and burnt it all and then put incense in to the fire in great amount. Raising beyond the sky the smoke from the incense indicated Eleni the ground where the cross had been buried.

Today, the Orthodox Christians of Ethiopia celebrate the day by setting fire to the Damara as a symbol of the woods that Queen Eleni had used to find the true cross in which Christ had been crucified.

The Choirs

Choirs from several churches, putting on similarly designed but diversely coloured clothes circled the Damara as they were singing their beautifully tuned songs. The choirs usually begin their presentations after the Pope has made his extended but interesting speech. A long-time of trainings which aim at glorifying the celebration is always given for the choirs by the churches. When the mass of these choirs moved to the square it was like a tide over a great sea.

The Procedure

Meskel being a great celebration has many procedures before the Damara is set on fire. Before all is the song coming from loud speakers once the people had started to gather at the square. A deacon usually presents these songs in Ge'ez language beginning from about 9 o'clock. The singing continues up to ten to ten at which time the common prayer is said.

On this year's Meskel celebration it was not only the Pope who had made a speech but also some authorities from the government.

While the people had been starting to the square federal polices had already safeguarded the streets to keep the people's move in order. And it was only after a search by polices that anyone could have entered the square. While entering the square'twuafs' are provided for free. The priests and deacons stood before the pope holding huge wooden crosses and velvet umbrellas up their heads. Some men sitting on dark-brown horses moved about inside the square while the ceremony was being performed.....

The words we have used, we are aware, can never be enough to explain the exact happenings of this magnificent celebration. Therefore, we would love to say to our readers 'you should come and see it yourself.'

Special Happenings

The usual procedures were accompanied by special happenings that decorated the entire celebration. A model of Lalibela's rock-hewn churches were put on the back of a vehicle and brought to the square for display. This model was made of wood and thin garment. Circuses with balloons of green, yellow and red colours were also demonstrated on this vast field. They were meant to show the value of the flag. A replica of the Ark of the Covenant was also made with its whole dramatic scene of Queen of Sheba and her son Menelik's arrival with the ark. The celebration had got a live transmission on the National Television of Ethiopia. The entire program had also been transmitted on the big screen suspended to one corner of the square. The crew of the station and many volunteers from the Red Cross had also been moving about the square.

Photo's by Shawel Tadesse