

MONDOFOTO

The *Mäsqäl* feast among the Irob of Ethiopia

Photos and notes by Moreno Vergari – Ethnorêma

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Photo 1 – The *dāmāra*-bonfire during the Orthodox celebration of the *Mäsqäl* (Dawhan)

These pictures show the celebration of the feast of the *Mäsqäl* in the villages of Alitena (photos 4-26, 33), Dawhan (photos 1-3) and Kalla‘asa¹ (photos 27-32), among the Saho-speaking community of the Irob, living in the Irob *wäräda* of the Təgray region of Ethiopia. The *Mäsqäl* (lit. ‘Cross’), the “Feast of the Finding of the True Cross”, is one of the most commonly observed religious feasts in Ethiopia, both by the Orthodox and the Catholic communities. It is celebrated on the 17th of *Mäskäräm* of the Ethiopic calendar, corresponding to the 27th of September in the Gregorian one.

The tradition of the *Mäsqäl* is connected with the discovery of the True Cross by Queen Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (274-337). According to the legend, Helena discovered the Cross thanks to a miracle, when she traveled to Palestine (see the works quoted in the References for more details).

The first official record of the celebration of this feast in Ethiopia comes from a document of the 13th century, where the feast of the ‘Illuminating Cross’ is listed together with others, such as the feasts of the Nativity, Baptism, and Resurrection. But the feast

“gained unprecedented importance in late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century Ethiopia. It went from being a minor festival in the wider ‘catholic’ church, to a national feast of the Ethiopian Christian monarchy. According to several sources, the Emperor Dawit II (1382-1412) received a fragment of the True Cross from the Coptic Patriarch as a reward for securing his freedom when he was arrested by the ‘King of Egypt’. Dawit marched his troops down the Nile until the terrified Muslim surrendered. The grateful Patriarch offered him a reward of 120,000 dinars, but Dawit rejected the Gold saying ‘God did not save us with gold and silver, but through the blood of the Cross’. The Patriarch then gave him a fragment of the True Cross.” (Kaplan: 449-450).

However, looking at the current celebration of the feast among the Irob, both at the community level and at the most intimate, familial one, there seems to be very little awareness about the religious significance related to the origin of this feast.

Speaking with some elders, it turns out that for them the feast had previously had a less religious connotations, and for this reason was also shared by the Muslims. For them this celebration, which coincides with the end of the rainy season, was the ላ~ቲ ባዓል [laati ba‘al], the ‘feast of the cattle’².

New elements, characteristic of the Christian feast, such as the *dämära* and the cross, would therefore have overlapped with ancient rites connected with the harvest and fertility. The pictures show some of the main elements of this celebration.

¹ In the Irob-Saho modified Ethiopian official orthography ዓለሊቲ~ና [‘alliteena], ዳውኃን [dawhan], and ካለላዓለ [kalla‘asa], respectively.

² From the Saho word ላ~ [laa] ‘cattle’ + ቲ [ti] ‘of’, and the Tigrinya word ባዓል [ba‘al] ‘feast, holiday’.



Photo 2 – The lighting of the *dāmāra* during the Orthodox celebration of the *Mäsqäl* (Dawhan)



Photo 3 – Singing and playing the ካቦ [kabaro]



Photo 4 – The public celebration of the *Mäsqäl* in Alitena



Photo 5 – The skinning after the slaughtering of goats



Photo 6 – The meat being divided into twelve parts



Photo 7 – The preparation of the different kinds of **ጊዳም** [gi'dim], sausages formed in a casing made from the intestine, layers of pieces of stomach or other parts.



Photos 8 and 9 – Other phases of the preparation of the *gi'dim*.





Photos 10 and 11 – The preparation of the ሶላ [sola], the campfire for roasting meat.
The *sola* is prepared by putting flat stones on a pyre of pieces of wood.





Photo 12 - When only embers remain, the meat is put on the hot stones to be roasted.



Photo 13 – Distribution of the መ~ሰ [mees], the traditional hydromel, made of water, honey, and the root of ገ~ሰ [geeso] (*Rhamnus prinoides*) fermented together several days



Photos 14 and 15 – The ሶላት አዶ [solat hado], the ‘meat of the *sola*’, is ready





Photo 16 – Women preparing a milk container, purifying it with smoke



Photo 17 – Women adorn their elaborated hair with flowers



Photo 18 - Women preparing the **ዳጎሐ** [dagħa], traditional Saho and Irob porridge



Photos 19 and 20 - The *dagha* is ready





Photo 21 - Elders waiting on the summit of a mountain for the ritual anointing of the cattle



Photo 22 – The horns of the cattle are anointed with butter, asking for blessing on them



Photo 23 – After the cattle comes the time for people to be anointed with butter



Photo 24 – Men playing the *kabaro*



Photo 25 – Women singing, clapping their hands



Photo 26 – Playing and dancing



Photo 27 – Praying before killing the sheep and goats at Tesfay Mizginna’s house (Kalla’asa)



Photo 28 – Women in the ሂደም [hidmo] ready to eat the newly prepared *dagha*



Photo 29 – Elders attending the feast



Photo 30 – The slaughtering of goats and sheep



Photo 31 – Marking the liver of a goat with a cross



Photo 32 – Cooking the meat on the *sola*



Photo 33 – Celebrating the *Mäsqäl* with a different look

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