

Voices: Christmas in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in Africa. It still follows the ancient Julian calendar. As a result, Ethiopians celebrate Christmas on Jan. 7.

Celebrating Christ's birth at church

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's celebration of Christ's birth—what we call Christmas in the West—is called Ganna. Ganna comes 12 days before the Timkat festival, another important holiday, commemorating the baptism of Jesus. It is a day when families attend church.

The day before Ganna, people fast all day. The next morning at dawn, everyone dresses in white. Most people wear a traditional garment called a Netela. It's a thin white cotton piece of cloth with brightly colored stripes across the ends. It's worn like a shawl or toga. If you live in a big town or city, you might wear "Western" clothes.

Then, everyone goes to the early mass at 4 a.m. in the morning. In a celebration that takes place several days later, the priests will dress in turbans and red and white robes as they carry beautifully embroidered fringed umbrellas.

Ganna food and fun

Surrounding Ganna are many festivities and celebrations that occur in homes from family to family. These celebrations always include Ethiopia's traditional cuisines.

The special Christmas dish is *doro wat*, which is a delicious thick spicy stew with chicken and whole boiled eggs in it. It is eaten with *injera*, a thin

sourdough flatbread used to scoop up the *wat* instead of using cutlery. The special drink for Christmas is made from barley.

On Christmas Day, many people wear traditional Ethiopian dress. It is a day for families to gather together, to eat and enjoy time together.

An Ethiopian legend claims the shepherds of the Christmas story, after they heard about the birth of Jesus, celebrated the news with a spontaneous game resembling hockey using their wooden staffs. For this reason, on Christmas day, mainly boys and young men play a game similar to hockey, with a curved wooden stick and a round wooden ball. The game is called *Yágenna Chewata* , or *genna* for short.

A religious, not commercial, observance

Ganna is a strictly religious occasion with its own unique traditions. Rather than giving gifts, the focus is on ritual, liturgy and ceremony. The main ceremonial activities take place in and around Ethiopian Orthodox churches, with locals taking part in processions and special services.

Ethiopians see nothing to do with Christmas during December, when we in the West celebrate Christmas. Even in January, there are few decorations or signs of Christmas. It is not a very commercial holiday in Ethiopia.

As noted above, gift-giving is not central to the Ethiopian Christmas tradition. Family members may give small gifts. Only families with lots of money talk about Santa Claus or Father Christmas.

Ganna, instead of being an occasion for giving gifts in Ethiopia, instead is a time focused on religious observances, feasting and games.

Nebiye Kelile is the pastor of Orchard Hills Baptist Church and lead pastor

of Pathway City Church, both in Garland. The views expressed are those solely of the author.