

# Ye Ganna Baal – Ethiopian Christmas

*A common way to refer to the Christmas holiday is "ye ganna baal". The word Ganna is used interchangeably with the word Christmas to mean the birth of Christ (leddat).*

Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in Africa. It still follows the ancient Julian calendar, so Ethiopians celebrate Christmas on January 7. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's celebration of Christ's birth is called *Ganna*. 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 Ethiopians don a traditional *shamma*, a thin, white cotton wrap with brightly colored stripes across the ends. The *shamma* is worn somewhat like a toga. Urban Ethiopians might put on white Western garb. Then everyone goes to the early mass at four o'clock 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.



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On January 19, Ethiopians begin the three-day celebration called *Timkat*.

Most Ethiopians who live outside the modern capital city, Addis Ababa, live in round mud-plastered houses with cone-shaped roofs of thatched straw. In areas where stone is plentiful, the houses may be rectangular stone houses. The churches in Ethiopia echo the shape of the houses. In many parts of the country there are ancient churches carved out of solid volcanic rock. Modern churches are built in three concentric circles.

In a modern church, the choir assembles in the outer circle. Each person entering the church is given a candle. The congregation walks around the church three times in a solemn procession, holding the flickering candles. Then they gather in the second circle to stand throughout the long mass, with the men and boys separated from the women and girls. The center circle is the holiest space in the church, where the priest serves Holy Communion.

Around the time of *Ganna*, the men and boys play a game that is also called *ganna*. It is somewhat like hockey, played with a curved stick and a round wooden ball.

The foods enjoyed during the Christmas season include *wat*, a thick, spicy stew of meat, vegetables, and sometimes eggs as well. The *wat* is served from a beautifully decorated watertight basket onto a "plate" of *injera*, which is flat sourdough bread. Pieces of *injera* are used as an edible spoon to scoop up the *wat*.

Twelve days after *Ganna*, on January 19, Ethiopians begin the three-day celebration called *Timkat*, which commemorates the baptism of Christ. The children walk to church services in a procession. They wear the crowns and robes of the church youth groups they belong to. The grown-ups wear the *shamma*. The priests will now wear their red and white robes and carry embroidered fringed umbrellas.

The music of Ethiopian instruments makes the *Timkat* procession a very festive event. The *sistrum* is a percussion instrument with tinkling metal disks. A long, T-shaped prayer

stick called a *makamiya* taps out the walking beat and also serves as a support for the priest during the long church service that follows. Church officials called *dabtaras* study hard to learn the musical chants, *melekets*, for the ceremony.

Ethiopian men play another sport called *yeferas guks*. They ride on horseback and throw ceremonial lances at each other.

*Ganna* and *Timkat* are not occasions for giving gifts in Ethiopia. If a child receives any gift at all, it is usually a small gift of clothing. Religious observances, feasting, and games are the focus of the season.

## **Six Steps to Celebrating Christmas in Ethiopia**

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Christmas is a major holiday in [Ethiopia](#) where more than half of the population is Orthodox Christian. The [celebrations](#) occur January 7, the Feast of the Epiphany, instead of December 25.

### **Step One**

Make sure to set up a manger scene that includes the Three Magi. Legend has it that the king bearing frankincense was King Balthazar of Ethiopia.

### **Step Two**

Infuse the celebrations with the essential oil frankincense, which was traditionally a gift suitable for a high priest. Today you can mix frankincense with spices or seeds to create different aromas, or you can burn frankincense incense.

### **Step Three**

Attend a local Christian Orthodox service if there are any nearby. Keep in mind that the services sometimes require that men and women sit in separate areas and that services can last up to three hours.

### **Step Four**

Sing carols and carry candles either during the service or afterwards.

### **Step Five**

Prepare an Ethiopian feast for the Christmas meal that includes a main course, such as doro wat (a spicy chicken stew), injera bread (flat round bread) and homemade wine or beer. Keep in mind that injera bread is used to scoop and eat food, hence replacing utensils. The Christmas meal, which is served January 7, is preceded by major preparations that include the purchase and slaughter of an animal (typically a goat or cow).

### **Step Six**

Encourage the children to play ganna or leddat, which is a form of field hockey in which sticks with hooks on one end are used. The game is played by two opposing teams and the stick and ball are made from locally grown trees. In Ethiopia the teams often represent certain regions and the rivalry can be fierce. According to tradition, shepherds celebrated when they heard of Jesus' birth by playing such a game.

## Tips

- There are no Christmas trees in a traditional Ethiopian Christmas. However, Christmas trees, sparkles and artificial snow have begun to spring up in the capital city of Addis Ababa.
- The exchange of gifts is not customary for Christmas in Ethiopia. The one exception to this is that some families give children new clothing as a part of the celebrations.
- The word Ganna is used interchangeably with the word Christmas to mean the birth of Christ (leddat). A common way to refer to the [holiday](#) is "ye ganna baal".
- Ethiopia is a country with more than 80 languages and many cultural influences, so Christmas traditions are often diverse and cannot be generalized. The preceding steps represent a few local traditions that may or may not be appropriate for your personal celebration of Christmas.